

112. Creating Joy and Community Through Poetry w/ West Hollywood Poet Laureate Jen Cheng

Dan Dissinger: [00:00:00] Hey everyone. Welcome to another episode of Writing Remix. I'm your host, Dan Inger and Happy National Poetry Month, and I'm here with a very special guest today. I'm here with the West Hollywood poet Laureate Jen Cheng. A little bit about Jen. She's the author of a poetry collection, braided Spaces, a California Arts Council Fellow, and a Tin House workshop alum.

She is a multidisciplinary artist who blends. East West influences as Feng shui poetry. Jen is the creator and facilitator of Palabras Literary Salon, a bipoc centered series. Her writing is found in the Cafe Review Passengers Journal, and forthcoming in Flower Song Press and Colossus Press with stories between audiences, mystery detective fans, and queer love.

Jen is a cross pollinator and community creator. You can connect with her on social media, on Instagram and Blue Sky at Jen c Voice, or at her website, gen c [00:01:00] voice.com. Jen Cheng, thank you so much for being here.

Jen Cheng: Hi Dan. Thank you so much for inviting me and having this special episode for National Poetry Month.

Uh, April is a wonderful month. It's not only my birthday month, but poetry month, so I was like, yes, this, we gotta do this.

Dan Dissinger: Well, that, that is amazing. Poetry month and your birthday. Well, I mean, that's it. I mean, being a poet and having your birthday in National Poetry month, that's amazing. That is unbelievable.

Well, I'm so happy you're here today. Uh, why don't you let the audience know a little bit more about yourself?

Jen Cheng: Well, I am so excited that this Saturday we're having poetry Scrabble at the West Hollywood, uh, library. The library is a fantastic place to meet neighbors like you. This is how we met at a library class, and I encourage people to check their local libraries for, uh, free classes, resources.

So many things happen [00:02:00] at libraries and, uh, not enough people know to show up, right? Because we get stuck in our, uh, daily. Grind and we don't take enough time to do what I call artist dates of taking that self-care time to go learn something new. I think all of us need to do an artist date, and that is a term from the artist way.

So for those of us who are looking for your passion or just looking for a little bit more self care, I am a big advocate for checking out your local library or community centers for free classes or low cost classes.

Dan Dissinger: Uh, you know, I just, uh, went and got my library card at the West Hollywood Library. It's been so long since I actually had a physical library card.

I was very happy. It was like very nostalgic. I was like, oh my God, I'm getting a library card. Um, and it was so great. So I'm very happy about that. So, so you brought up artist state. It definitely like made me think about, you know, doing the [00:03:00] artist's way. And what's so funny is I just actually assigned my students to do that, to do an artist date at USC.

Um, why do you find the artist date is so important for writers? Especially like we, we have, you know, all these things that we do as writers, you know, we have our process, we have our revisions, we have our, trying to create collections and all this stuff, but what is important to you when it comes to having an artist date?

Jen Cheng: In general, we have a lot of screen time. If you're busy writing and editing, you're spending all this time at your computer and it's important for you to live life. You have more to write about if you live right. And there are so many great things. Like yesterday I did, uh, some gallery walking. There's so much to see at Art Galleries, another free resource.

You get to breathe in other people's inspirations. You get to be stimulated by things you might [00:04:00] not have created yourself, and you'll find out what you like and what you don't like. And it's a way to get to know yourself. You get to know yourself when you're butting heads bumping into elbows of other kind of art, right?

So in fact, if you have a strong reaction, you're like, wow, I love this. That might stir you to write towards something unexpected that takes you out of your rut. I tell people I don't believe there's such a thing as writer's block, because. If you're getting stuck, lean on your friends, lean on artist colleagues.

You don't even know. Go read something else. I remember a great quote from Ray Bradbury whose writing affected me deeply when I was a junior high kid, and I saw him at the um, LA Times Festival of Books [00:05:00] when I first landed in LA 18 years ago. And he said, when can't figure out something. Go take a nap.

There's so much that happens in your unconscious subconscious, go take a nap. You know? Mm-hmm. And there's a Native American tradition that I'm not skilled at, but I've read about it that you can find, uh, answers. Before you go to bed, you can ask questions and ask your dreams, ask your sleeping self, ask your napping self, help me solve this problem.

Mm-hmm. So if you're having a plot point that's sticking, you're like, what do I do about this poem that needs a little help? You could ask, you know, your sleep. You could send it off to a friend to say, Hey, what do you think I need to do to edit this to make it fly? That's what [00:06:00] writers are for. That's what artist communities are for.

And this is why having an artist state is important because it might pop a new word that you're like, oh, that's the word I needed for the poem, or it might give you a new title to work with.

Dan Dissinger: Wow. I mean, you're, there's so much there. I just was writing a bunch of notes 'cause I was like, I wanna remember this 'cause I wanna ask about it.

But you know, the last thing he just touched on too, about the c you know, writing communities and this idea and building community with writers. How, you know, you are now the West Hollywood Poet Laureate, which is so cool. Uh, so amazing one that was Hollywood has a poet laureate and like, there's such a like, thriving, you know, creative community there.

How do you, um, as a poet laureate, how important is it for you to create that sort of space to build community and like also cultivate spaces where people can then create their [00:07:00] other micro communities inside there? Right? Because like we bring people together and then people click and then they have their other communities.

Like how important is the community building part of being the poet laureate to you?

Jen Cheng: Well backtrack a little bit before I became poet laureate. I was a teen journalist who got in trouble, got censored and fell into learning what it is

to be an activist and facilitator. And with that in mind, the social justice values is that I really care about accessibility.

And so for all my class descriptions that I post with the library, I say, no experience needed. Bring your curiosity.

Dan Dissinger: Hmm.

Jen Cheng: I, I know that there are people out there who are scared of poetry, who think, oh, I'm no good at this. It took me years to admit that I was a poet. It took me [00:08:00] years to say my writing is worth taking seriously.

And I think there's a lot of cultural baggage, family baggage that suppress us from really. Chasing our creativity, chasing our voices. And so with the social justice values, and having been a survivor myself, amplifying voices, amplifying underrepresented voices is important to me. I also come from a maternal grandmother who was illiterate.

Mm-hmm. And so to make note that I as a female body born person might not have gotten an education to be illiterate person in a different circumstance, and still today, there are kids who can't read and write. And poetry is a sweet spot where I call it a snack. It's [00:09:00] small. It can be accessible. I think all of us remember learning about haikus in elementary school and, and to say that that provides an opening point, an opening door for people to explore and be curious.

And so backtracking to where I came from and how I see the world, that poetry is a really great access point that we can encourage more people to try out. You don't have to be good at it. You can just come to a class and do your own writing, and if you're shy, you don't have to share. So then fast forward to now, where in my role as a poet laureate, I say, um, no experience needed.

Bring your curiosity. I create opportunities where I say, here's your free write moment. We're just gonna. Scribble, [00:10:00] scribble, no. Edit. Uh, you don't have to share if you don't want to. Share if you can. Um, and then that's why I created things like Poetry Scrabble, which is an interactive sculpture. And I had the privilege of working with the WeHo Arts Festival last year where I had a budget and I was like, oh, well, with this budget I can build a thing, a thing that invites people to try out, you know, a poem, make a phrase, put three words together.

Give me a new word that isn't already up on the board. I think enough of us know what poetry magnets look like on a refrigerator. You've been to a party or

friend's house, somebody had it at some point and. There's a thing that happens where you're physically moving a word around and other people are delightfully [00:11:00] doing it and strangers can smile and laugh and see a joke on the board together.

And that is how we build community. You share a moment where you can laugh or giggle or say, huh, that's curious. And I've put the poetry scrabble in different settings to test run it and make it better. And every time people who don't know each other can be like, wow. Now, when I teach a class at the library, I try to get people to introduce themselves and at the end of class I say, you know, let's share what you learned today and please make a new friend.

You know, class is adjourned. Now, go talk to each other, talk to somebody you don't know. And usually I try to bring food or reception, and I think that is a cue I took from Maya [00:12:00] Angelou and other elders in the creative world that when you break bread together, you're making, uh, an a, you know, you're making a connection.

Hmm.

Dan Dissinger: Wow.

Jen Cheng: So did I just drop a whole bomb on you? Yeah.

Dan Dissinger: I said this in another episode once, I think it was with, uh, this, uh, the great, a great professor in Florida, uh, Nat Garcia. Uh, they said something and I was like, I wish I had a soundboard where I had like a bomb or something. Because like what you just said really encompasses so much about that, you know?

'cause earlier you said it took a while for you to accept that you were a poet, or say you were a poet and at the same time. You then, once you did that, it seems like you were so, you were building in a way such beautiful spaces for people to come together. I've had the, you know, the pleasure of being [00:13:00] in your workshop and the, uh, the Feng shui workshop, which I wrote so many great things that I'm still gonna be, I'm working on.

And it, it felt not just like, um, it felt like a space to be courageous as a writer. 'cause I've been also like what you said, like how do I accept poet as part of me? And I've been doing it for a long time, but I always like push it away and you provide a space for people to really see that in themselves.

So that I was, uh, you know, I'm really appreciative of, and it's something that I see you do when you do that. So, and I love how. When you talk about community, it's more than just the writing, it's the breaking of bread, it's the speaking with each other. It is this, um, moment where people come together. And I guess, like what I wanna say, like, I'm, I'm curious in terms of how then much of that, that prior to being poet or prior to [00:14:00] accepting poet, do you feel like plays into your, I feel like drive to create community, you know, like you, you know, I see, I've been to other workshops.

I I've done stuff like that. My MFA I've done, you know, the thing with the writers community building's, a different skillset that writers a lot of writers don't have. What do you pull from your life experience that makes you good at that? And also have that as part of the, uh, part of the writing experience?

I.

Jen Cheng: At the end of the day, the personal is political. Hmm. I grew up as the eldest daughter of five kids in an immigrant family where we didn't have much. So I was born into a responsibility to help take care of my younger siblings. And there is definitely eldest [00:15:00] daughter mentality, which is different than eldest child.

It's different than middle child. My youngest sister doesn't have the same personal inclination the way I do about gathering people. Certainly you could be a different birth order, certainly you could be a different kind of person and be that community gatherer.

I started young as a storyteller because I loved reading books and my siblings really loved it when I did voices, especially my brother, and he would say again, again, again, every time I read the Snow White Story and I did the Evil Queen's voice and I did the Snow White Voice, and I did the narrator voice, and it showed me the power of the delight that we could bring.

From just reading, from telling [00:16:00] stories. I didn't get to go to camp. I didn't have some of those economic privileges, so we made little things at home during rainy days, like shadow puppets and origami puppet shows. So storytelling is really powerful. It helps bond people, and I think that's where poetry comes into play.

I'm much more of a narrative poet because I am first and foremost a storyteller, and however that comes out, it could come out in a puppet show, it could come out, uh, as a novel. It could come out as a snack of a poem. So I wanna go back

and make sure we answer your first question. I might have strayed away from no where, where do I come from?

As, as a. Community gatherer. I think that's what you were Yeah. Saying. So, yeah. Community gathering came to me as a child [00:17:00] and then it came to me as an activist and it came to me because I think all of us creatives were called weirdos at some point, and we, weirdos don't have a natural sorority or fraternity or some kind of clique to belong to.

So we artists have to find each other somehow. Mm-hmm. And instead of waiting for an invitation for a seat at a table that wasn't made for me, I've learned to create a table to invite others who may not have seats at a table.

Dan Dissinger: Mm-hmm. Excellent. Wow. That, I mean, I, that was you. People come, you know, I, I've been doing this for like four or five years, and when people love what they do, [00:18:00] uh, they always go back to these moments that are so instilled in their, you know, personal histories and you can see it.

You can then, for me, the, the honor is to watch that as I know that person in the present being like, oh, that does make sense. And like having, like I said, like been in your workshops, all this like, makes so much sense and that's what makes it so, so people can be courageous in your workshop. So I thank you for that because you could see like, I'm.

The way you do the work that you do, the, the, the way you explain the poetry scrabble, like it's really about people coming together to create these language spaces and that, and it's, um, it's so participatory, you know, and that's what's really great. It breaks down those, like, those walls and those gates for people to be like, how do I do poet?

How do I be this? And you're just like, let's do it together. And, and I, and I, it's really, it's really commendable to kind of have that, [00:19:00] um, to have that ability and it's special. So that I Thank you. That's amazing. Um,

Jen Cheng: yeah. My goal is when I teach, my goal is to offer tools so that you can reiterate the exercises over and over again.

Find your own way. Hmm. There is no one supreme way of writing poetry, I think. Mm-hmm. Finding your own voice is a precious and important task that we need to do as creatives, as human beings. Hmm. I'm gonna say something kind of off the wall.

Dan Dissinger: This is the podcast to do that. Go right.

Jen Cheng: I, I was thinking, how did I learn?

What was my earliest idea of learning to accept that being weird is okay.

Dan Dissinger: Mm-hmm.

Jen Cheng: And I was like, you know, weird. Al Yakovich really put [00:20:00] weird out there and he made us laugh in rewriting popular songs in his weird, funny lyrics. Mm. And I think that when we are creatives and you're talking about courage, finding the courage we need, I.

Examples of other people being courageous. Mm. Maya Angelou speaking. You know about, does my sassy, does my sassiness scare you? Does my sassiness bother you? That's important for a girl to hear when we've been told, you know, keep quiet. You know, children are to be seen and not heard. And to have poets like Maya Angelou, Ada Limón singers like Billie Holiday take risks.

[00:21:00] Those courageous people out there are what we poets writing poetry now are standing on their shoulders. We're we're walking their trailblazing paths. So another aspect that I. Infuse in my teaching is to remember our ancestors. Hmm. And that has a lot to do with the fact that sometimes finding a good mentor or a teacher who hears you and sees you is not always available to somebody struggling to find their voice.

So thanks to the internet now, thanks to other ways to access media, thanks to libraries, we can find examples of teachers that we need. Mm-hmm.

Dan Dissinger: That's amazing. So how, um, so in terms of the podcast and, and the idea of the writing part, how do [00:22:00] you approach your writing process? And I do want to go back to as well too, and we will go back to the, you know, things that I would love to hear too about, you know.

Writers that you read to kind of, you know, fill that well too. But first I'd love to hear about what does your writing process look like if you, you know, have a very specific one or you know, how you cultivate your voice and continue to build new work. I,

Jen Cheng: I say, first of all, everyone's creative process is different. Mm-hmm. There's no one golden way. I'm going to go to something very tangible like exercise. My neighbor in New York really loved her spin class and

convinced me to go with her. I hated it. It was not for me. Those of you who love spin class, good on you, you know, have your yum.

Enjoy your spin class. But it's [00:23:00] not for me. It's too repetitive. It's too much. Go, go, go, go, go. I have a friend who loves dance classes, like I love dance classes. I like variety. Mm-hmm. And somehow my dancer friend also loves running, which I find painfully repetitive and boring. So you can love dance and a repetitive thing like running.

So for those writers who say, I get up at 5:00 AM and write every day from five to six because I need a ritual that's so great. I have a friend who's a playwright, an essay, a story, uh, teller who's amazing, who does that 5:00 AM ritual. That's not for me. I am not a morning person, so my rituals of my day are not at a set time.

Okay. I definitely rely on meditation and some days I need to turn on some sound [00:24:00] bowls. Other days I need to turn on a meditation to say I believe in miracles. Because part of writing is finding that miracle and magic and you're like, oh, that's the chemistry of the words that need to sizzle and spark.

So I'm gonna give a concrete example of one of my processes. I was like, you know, I love Emily Dickinson. Hmm. And I have an assignment that each April as a poet laureate of West Hollywood, we have the honor of writing an ODE to the city and to celebrate National Poetry Month. So with that, I said, you know, can I write a poem that feels like I'm influenced by Emily Dickinson?

Mm-hmm. And I had just picked up a used book that talked about Emily Dickinson's poetry her life. And I was like, great, let me [00:25:00] just. Sink into this immerse myself like taking a bath. Mm. Right. Like I'm in a bath of Emily Dickinson's life. I'm in a bath of her poems. And then maybe I emerge from this bath and I can, you know, spin some yarn.

That sounds like I'm influenced by Emily Dickinson. And that was really fruitful. So with that, can I read you the poem that I wrote for this year, April, 2025 National Poetry Month? Uh, I have a poem that isn't owed to West Hollywood.

Dan Dissinger: Excellent. Yeah, absolutely.

Jen Cheng: And I'm gonna try it two ways. I'm gonna do it one way without the musical accompaniment.

Mm-hmm. And I'll do it one way with the musical accompaniment and you'll decide which one to. Cut in or leave them both? I don't know. Okay. Alright. Alright. [00:26:00] Eternity. We poets write toward eternity/ Unpacking burdens and adversity/ Despite the strife, we write into the light/ Tumble through exquisite sunset dreams/ Knit riddles with rhyme and embroider the scene/ Tally up time on Route 66, count the winks of the moon/ Care for the heart before grief breaks us too soon/ Archive recollections, before they're disposed/ Salvage our souls, alchemize rainbow jewels more precious than gold.

Here's the musical accompaniment with the poem.

We poets write toward eternity, unpacking burdens and adversity

despite

the strife [00:27:00] we write into the light, tumble through exquisite sunset, dreams, knit riddles with rhyme and embroider the scene.

Tally up time on Route 66. Count the winks of the moon. Care for the heart before grief breaks us too soon. Archive recollections before they're disposed. Salvage our souls alchemize. Rainbow jewels. More precious than gold.

Dan Dissinger: Wow. I'm gonna keep both of them because they both do something different. You know, it's like, there's like so much, um, it's like there's a second voice in the one with the music, right? Like, you have a line, the music has a line, you have a line, the music has a [00:28:00] line. When you read it without it, it definitely, it's like you are taking up the space.

Um, and I love that too. What was, Hmm? When you chose the music, right. What kind of choices or, you know, 'cause sometimes within poetry, sometimes the page, like we, we allow the poem sometimes to dictate the, the format of like, what it might look like. How did the music come to you in terms of like the, the being a, a part of it and collaborating with the sound?

Like where did it come from, the poem? Did it come from somewhere else? Like how do you choose that?

Jen Cheng: I am originally trained as a pianist and I still teach piano. And I admitted I was a songwriter before I admitted I was a poet. Oh, okay. That's, that's the joke. [00:29:00] Uh, there's something about music that gives you rhythm and flow and so.

My goal that I'm working towards is I'm a pianist and I would like to be able to accompany me myself with musical accompaniment if the poem calls for it. And I'm in the process of learning the baritone ukulele, which is a smaller guitar. And I am very inspired by Joni Mitchell, who has lived in Laurel Canyon and is still performing these days at Hollywood Bowl and such so that she has created memorable music is so inspiring.

And so when I was thinking, gosh, if you're thinking about West Hollywood and the people who have come and gone mm-hmm. That we are a [00:30:00] geography full of a creative history that so many creative people have lived here. The song, both sides Now from Joni Mitchell kind of gave me the harmonic undertone. So, um, that's the musical inspiration is to find something that had some of that minor chord reflective quality to give us that nostalgic and hopeful and dreamy kind of, um, support for the poem.

Yeah, so I just put the poem words in the chat in case you wanted to ask about one of the lines or ask about something, because as an artist I put a lot of intention behind my edits and the production of a poem. I might [00:31:00] start out doing a free write after, immerse myself in a bunch of reading. For whatever vibe or tone I wanna write in.

And then let that flow, let that free write happen, and then shape it like a sculptor. And then with that sculpting, I put in the intention, okay, I want it to have a little bit of a nostalgia. I want it to have a little bit of, um, care. I want it to have something that kind of sparkles, you know? So with the, with the intention that I wanted something to sparkle, I wanted to use the word exquisite.

There's something about the word exquisite that sparkles a lot of people. Oh, I love that word. A lot of people come to LA to Sunset Boulevard chasing their dreams of being an actor, being a songwriter, being a rock star, being whatever. So Hollywood, west Hollywood, [00:32:00] we are the center of where people come to.

Mm-hmm. To either seek refuge as an LGBTQ plus person, seek community as that marginalized community, or to chase their artistic dreams. So I wanted to celebrate that.

Dan Dissinger: I mean, and I love the word exquisite. It's one of the words that I, it's one of my favorite words that comes into some of my poems when I write.

I'm like, well, this is a good time for it. Um, but, but I love also the opening line, this idea of like poets writing toward eternity. That, that's, it's such an interesting, I like image to think of, well, when you write toward a space, like,

and eternity is the space. It's, it's kind of almost unending. Like it continually expands.

And I found that really interesting, especially, you know, thinking about, I think you said earlier that you were in New York and [00:33:00] then you came here. Uh, is that, was that it? Like, were you, do you, so like me, like a living, I grew up in New York and then moved here and it's interesting to be in two different places where people go to for like dreams or art or refuge sometimes as well.

Right. And, um. I'm like, wow, you know, in New York you have, it's like the, like there's a hard, much more of a hardness in the hustle and here it is, like you have this poem and it's like you said like, I wanted it to be, have sparkle and have this. And it's like, yeah. When I think about when I moved here, I was so enamored with everything in terms of like hummingbirds and trees and flowers and lights and this in a different way.

Where in New York it could be like, is a difference to it, even though there's like, um, there's still magic there, but the landscape is a lot different. And so it's interesting to kind of have the two experiences. It also reminds me, there's a poet that I knew from [00:34:00] Naropa. Her name is Eleni Sikelianos. And Eleni Sikelianos wrote a book length poem called the California Poem, and it's kind of like the celebration of being, you know, a native of California and stuff like that.

And so much of this idea of like. The, you know, route 66 and like how that cuts through West Hollywood and everything. And just that idea is like so famous when you see it, you're like, oh my god, it, it comes straight through here. Wow. So I was like, um, interested in how you set that up. But there are so many lights in your poem, like, it, it's like lit up in different ways and like you said, like sparkle.

And it's very, very interesting, especially considering how specific you say you do your edits. So I love it. Very attention to detail, but the, but the piano adds something else to it. It reminds me of like an older Tom wait song that has that nostalgia in it, where like, he sings and you feel like you're in the fifties again.

You know? It's like, oh wow. [00:35:00] Um, but yeah, it was beautiful. Two different, very different pieces. Like when the, the music comes in, it's a totally different piece.

Jen Cheng: I appreciate this conversation. This is our first con, this is my first conversation about the poem. With just voice and the poem with the chords.

So I was like, well, when I get to learning to play the ukulele better, um, then I can take the, the ukulele and the chords on the road.

Dan Dissinger: Absolutely. There was a, where I used to live in Astoria, there was a whole ukulele store. It only sold ukuleles. I was like, it was the weirdest little thing. But I have a friend, uh, Aimee Herman they live in, um, Colorado.

Um, they're a, you know, a big friend, um, very close friend, an amazing writer and poet, has a couple books and um, a YA novel as well. And they used to do work with their ukulele and it was amazing. It just elevated it [00:36:00] in a different way. You know, they wrote some songs as well. The ukulele is an interesting instrument.

I'm looking forward to when you learn it, because I'd like to see what you do with it. It really would bring a lot of different, uh, aspects to it.

Jen Cheng: Yeah. Um, yeah, I, I, I heard a quote somewhere, I can't remember who said it. Music tells you how to feel. Mm. Words tell you what to think. Mm. And this is why, if I can work towards that performance aspect, then we can have, you know, poetry with music.

Um, maybe some of the poems become songs. It becomes a whole new superpower.

Dan Dissinger: Hmm. You

Jen Cheng: think about Leonard Cohen. And he's the example of someone who's a poet and a songwriter. Um, it, it, it's so powerful that his words are [00:37:00] engraved on people's jewelry or, you know, put on posters to inspire somebody. And that's what I mean that we poets write so that we can remember each other, that we can remember life, that we can remember humanity.

And I think that's the power of poetry and storytelling. So props to Joni Mitchell. Props to Leonard Cohen.

Dan Dissinger: Absolutely. Um, when you were in New York, did you do poetry while you were there as well? Were you part of or doing any sort of poetry or performing or anything there?

Jen Cheng: So my trajectory is that I am a San Francisco Bay Area, grown Oakland girl, uh, went to school at uc, Berkeley.

So those are very formative roots of who I am. And then in New York, [00:38:00] I say I lived there for four winters, three and a half years.

Dan Dissinger: Four winters is enough sometimes for some people.

Jen Cheng: And the fourth winter, I was like, I, I am. Why am I here? Yes, I'm here because I was waiting for the concert that I was singing with Stonewall Corral, where we got to sing with Meredith Monk.

Which is a pretty incredible experience and I was waiting for my God kid to be born, uh, who was expected to be born end of March, but decided to wait till April Fool's Day to make us wait for our grand entrance. Uh, so that's why I stayed through the winter was Meredith Monk. A baby to be born.

Dan Dissinger: Amazing.

Hmm. Wow. Now you're here and that's amazing. What a trajectory, right? Like, and there's a shout out to a Bay Area poet, Aimee Suzara, who I just saw at [00:39:00] AWP. Just wanna shout her out. Just because like it's, you know, there's a lot of great poets just even in the, you know, as you know, everywhere. And I always feel like, oh man, I meet so many people.

Um,

Jen Cheng: yeah, I lived in North Beach for a little bit, just down the street from City Lights Bookstore. Oh. And because I had such incredible experiences as a 20 something in San Francisco, I am currently writing a novel to celebrate that era of late 1990s. A very special time because it was the time before social media.

So social interactions were far more, I. Effortful and, and intentional. And there's something special about San Francisco where community is more easily found because it's a smaller city and it's a bit more tight knit. So even in my jazz music studies, it was so easy [00:40:00] to see the same musicians over and over again and really get to know their songs, their, the way they play.

And same with poetry. And so in my novel, I intentionally name a bookstore that was the center, it was the community center for L-G-B-T-Q folks, a different light and it's no longer there. Happy to know there's a new bookstore, uh, in the Castro. There's so many community spots that are important. In San Francisco's history that were important for L-G-B-T-Q folks.

And that's why I'm writing, uh, a romance dramedy that highlights the challenges of being outsiders to the SF Dyke community. And also how being an outsider is in your own family, [00:41:00] the struggle between Americanized daughters and immigrant moms. And what does that mean to have your family obligations and also find your queer, you know, identity as a queer woman in San Francisco.

Dan Dissinger: Hmm. Wow. Wow. So how do you, Hmm. So does a process change for you in terms of writing, going from poetry to prose like that, like writing a novel to versus are you a plotter or a pants? I mean, I don't, you know, I mean, there's, there's a whole thing like that, right?

Jen Cheng: I'm definitely a plotter. Uh, but you have to leave room for pantsing, right?

Uh, uh, one of my songwriting teachers said a great quote that helps me handle the many voices in my head, right? That there's the inner critic and then there's the inner child. And that at all [00:42:00] times you need to co-write in order to produce the thing that finishes itself. However, in the creative process, too much voicing from the inner critic will suppress the creativity.

So. In terms of allowing yourself to pants fly by the seat of your pants, you gotta let the inner child play a little bit. And that's something that I learned better with improv. So I've spent over 10 years taking classes and doing improv theater to unleash some of that creativity and be surprised by myself.

Because if you plot everything and you go to a T, that might mean that you're writing to a rigid system. And it is important to have an outline. There are people who told me that they have never [00:43:00] outlined anything. I was like, no, that gives me so much anxiety. So, so yes, I. I was like, okay, I figured out the ending.

I figured out the beginning. I need to figure out the plot points in the middle. Um, but the way I approach the novel is through character and the characters tell me what happens mm-hmm. To them. And then I was surprised. I was walking around Century City Mall during Christmas time and there was so much Christmas holiday stuff, and that was when I realized, oh, how do the two characters approach holidays Can influence their romantic connection.

Dan Dissinger: Absolutely. Yeah.

Jen Cheng: And I was like, don't forget to put that in the middle. [00:44:00] So you, you know, allowing space for inspiration like that to happen to you in.

Sometimes an uninspiring mall, you're like, whoa, so much, um, commercialism happening here. And yet that was a, a, a creative aha moment. Ah, we need to have the two of them fight about what does it mean to celebrate Christmas or not.

Mm,

Dan Dissinger: absolutely. Wow. Yeah, sometimes you get inspiration in the weirdest places, right? I mean, a mall is definitely a weird place to get inspiration. Um, um, that's amazing. Wow. So you're juggling a lot of different, I, uh, a lot of different creative projects together.

Jen Cheng: Yeah. I think the main difference, to answer your question with poetry versus writing a novel is that.

I write very densely in my poems that I have like two or three meanings and a line. And in a novel, I recently took the Tin [00:45:00] House winter workshop. I learned, I knew this, but I learned how much more I have space to unpack and breathe and to give more detail. And in the poem, I compact it so that you have space to decide as your reader, as the reader what you wanna think of it.

You might not unpack it, you might just say, oh, that was pretty exquisite, sunset dreams. And you don't need to unpack it. 'cause you're like, ah, that that scratched the itch. That that hit the spot. That's enough. Yeah. And then in the novel, the. My colleagues in my workshop were having so many questions. Yeah.

And I was like, okay, I gotta explain this. Gotta find a way to like explain it in one line. 'cause as a poet, I don't wanna go on and on about something. I wanna keep up the fast pace. Mm. So, um, yeah, [00:46:00] that's the, that's the difference between writing a novel and a poem for me, is that I need to breathe more detail into the novel and possibly explain things more.

So I think I'm gonna need a lot more test readers along the way.

Dan Dissinger: That's always been a thing for me, like. I'm definitely a poet who loves automatic writing, and I can do it really well. And when it comes to prose and writing, even during my, you know, dissertation and in my academic life, sentences just give me so much anxiety because I'm like, oh my God, I gotta slow down.

I gotta explain this. I gotta walk someone from A to B and then explain what the scenery might look like, you know? And, and I'm like, eh, I'm just gonna write

this poem. And I'm just like, I'm like, I'm abandoning this. Um, which is why I like podcasting.

Jen Cheng: Well, I think it's a personality thing, right? So you, you [00:47:00] have to be in the mood to have snacks, and you gotta be in the mood for a 12 course meal.

The difference between a poem and a full length novel and the 12 course meal. One time I did sign up for a 12 course meal, and by the sixth course I was like, oh, I have to get through six more of these. I'm grateful that the chef is this talented, but my stomach is like, whew, can I stand taller and make space?

Yeah,

Dan Dissinger: exactly. Right. Oh my God, that's so funny. Um, so what, you know, um, so what, what kind of authors or poets, like, do you read to, you know, mean, not to like gain inspiration sometimes it's like weird asking that, but like, what are, what do, who do you read? Like, who are the authors you return to? Maybe mostly in, in your life as a, as a writer or as a, and as a reader or, [00:48:00] and as a musician too.

I mean, you're probably returning to many different like albums, right? You know, all the time.

Jen Cheng: That is such a big question.

Dan Dissinger: I know,

Jen Cheng: I, I'm trying to parse it. Well, for example, to write that eternity poem that I just read for you. Um, I, you know, bathed myself in Emily Dickinson. I think it's much more easy to answer that question for specific projects, so, sure.

Um, I think this is a time to read another poem for you.

Dan Dissinger: Great. Yeah, absolutely.

Jen Cheng: So I am a huge fan of Bridgeton. Mm-hmm. And sometimes you can be inspired by different, uh, mediums. So if you'll pause, I need to grab my book and

Dan Dissinger: Sure.

Jen Cheng: The poem.[00:49:00]

All right. So a lot of my inspiration can come from anywhere, and Shonda Rhimes does a great job of giving us lots of fun characters to amuse ourselves at Bridge with the series Bridgeton. And as a human being, I am missing a lot of information about my ancestors. Mm-hmm. And one way to fill in the blank is to, uh, use your imagination.

Mm-hmm. And by writing a persona poem, I am being a gossip queen. That Bridgeton nar bridger's narrator is a gossip queen. And this is actually an abid that starts with G for grandma. Mm-hmm. And it [00:50:00] ends with F for finale.

Bridgerton's Narrator Spills the T(ea) about My Grandma. Grandma dearly departed with a Grand/ Hurrah, hailing respect instead of grief/ in turn, her memorial party was her dream birthday celebration, as she/ Just died gracefully of heart failure in her sleep/ Kind of a quiet exit but so obvious as her/ Last symphony.

Manipulation was her modus operandi, so/ None of her surviving seven children could say No to showing up/ Over all the years of plots she orchestrated to stoke/ Personality struggles with believable lies as the Drama/ Queen and Mother Mastermind of/ Recurring rivalries between/ Siblings. You needed the latest headlines [00:51:00] to know who was mad at whom in this/ Telenovela that could out drink other families/ Under the table. Air

/Violins would play to/ Whine about one sister's injustice or how/ Xenophobia ruined a brother's attempt at a white collar career./ Yarn skeins were what she left behind with a/ Zoetic puzzle of where she might have hidden her jewelry/ Accumulated hiding places were ways to anchor her/ Bravery through war occupation and poverty as she silently sang her survival song./ Conducting her power even from beyond, her heirs cleaned her home,/ Dug through every jacket, looking for secret pockets,/ Ever reminded how this frail elder knew how to perform her/ Finale.

Dan Dissinger: Wow.

It's [00:52:00] been a while since I've heard people do persona poems. I used to go to this open mic and this guy used to come out and do persona poems all the time, and I was like, that is so interesting.

I would never think to do something like that. What is the advantage and do you, do you feel of, or the, the creative, um, well, yeah, I, I would say like the

creative advantage of choosing a persona poem for certain poems. Like how, why the Choice for Persona.

Jen Cheng: Recently I performed a poem for the Rainbow Key Awards and knowing that it'll be a bunch of speeches.

What is my role as a poet laureate who has a few minutes to engage and invite people to be interested in poetry is not your typical poetry audience. Hmm. And so when I'm performing for a general. When I'm performing for a general audience, I know I need to [00:53:00] up the notch and be more entertaining. And so I express this concern to a poet friend and he says, I love your Grandma Bridgeton poem.

Do that. Write another poem at the Bridgeton voice. I was like, okay, I can do that. And I did and it was so much fun. So the joke is I'm gonna be writing a whole bunch more from the Bridgeton narrator's perspective. Okay. And the advantage of the Bridgeton narrator is one, I studied Julie Andrews and listened a lot to Mrs.

Potts from Beauty and the Beast, and, and so I have a bad British accent, but because it's coming out of me, who's this American, Asian American femme body and not. A British lady's voice, it's automatically not me. It's [00:54:00] automatically an extra courageous act that I can say whatever as this narrator, I can be a more salacious gossip queen, and it's not me.

Right. So there's, there's that extra courageousness that a persona poem gives you space to see the world from a different angle.

Dan Dissinger: Wow. Interesting. That's really cool. Wow.

Jen Cheng: We talked about courage earlier, right? Yeah. Yeah. And so my, my takeaway about persona poems is like, try one out. Find a character you love and adore and who's different than you.

The the, the key is to be different than who you are as your normal self. And then that persona will just take you far to a more exaggerated gossip queen that you would never normally be. You might be, I don't know, a villain. Somehow [00:55:00] we love villains.

I guess that's a prompt that I'm gonna give myself is I gotta go find a villain that I, I love that I'm gonna try to write a villain poem.

Dan Dissinger: That's amazing.

Jen Cheng: I mean, you can't have heroes without villains. Right. So

Dan Dissinger: no, they wouldn't exist. No, absolutely. Batman

Jen Cheng: wouldn't be Batman without Joker.

Dan Dissinger: Absolutely not.

Absolutely not.

Jen Cheng: The Hardy boys wouldn't have their adventures if there weren't mysteries to solve, and Absolutely. So thank you Nancy Drew for being one of my inspirations. Yeah. Um, so yeah, going back to answering your first question, like, who are my inspirations? I mean, I think we, we gotta give credit to our formative years as kids like Madeleine L'Engle Wrinkle In Time.

I could reread that book over and over again, and Oprah made a movie with that. Um. [00:56:00] Maya Angelou had her series. It wasn't just the one book. Um, I know why the Cage Bird sings, but it was all of that autobiographical memory. I was like, wow. If she could be a creative person with different lenses, being a dancer, being a singer, being a poet, being an actor, maybe that's the model I didn't see as a kid, and maybe that's what I need to become.

And I think that's where Maya Angelou's courage to live her truth as a full blown Renaissance woman creative person. I, I think that's where I found the biggest inspiration is like, okay, I don't fit neatly in a box. I'm a musician, I'm a dancer. I like to sing. I like to write. Who do I model after? Uh, so I think, you know, who do you read?

Is a question that could be reinterpreted [00:57:00] as who do you want to model after?

Dan Dissinger: Hmm. Excellent. Wow. So as we're winding down, like I'm wondering like, is poetry month, it's, you know, it's also, you said this interesting thing, uh, and I want to try, I think I'm remembering about poets writing, um, towards humanity too.

I think about humanity or for human, something in terms of humanity. How,

what role do you feel like poetry plays? In the world that we are living right now. How important is poetry right now? Do you feel, and I know that's a large question and I know that's a huge, there's like a bunch of things that could be, but I feel like, you know, as poets and, and writers and artists, you know,

especially [00:58:00] here in the us like there's, there's a lot of things happening and a lot of distractions and a lot of like, pressure in terms of all sorts of other things.

In terms of, in terms of taking your art and monetizing. But like, how do you feel, like, what's something that you can, that, what do you feel is a role that an a poet's voice plays right now? Possibly,

Jen Cheng: um, two parts to it. One, going back to my poem, eternity. There's a line that I specifically wrote. In reaction to knowing my role in history right now is that with censorship and book bannings that have been around forever and worsened these days, um, poets and writers, this is the line I wrote, archive recollections before they're disposed.

That we are archivists, that we are [00:59:00] writing the memories so that we don't forget, we don't lose our stories. And I think that is one role. The other role is about joy, that we need to celebrate joy. And this comes from my wellness background and my own, um, study of. East West philosophies. That's how I, um, came up with Feng shui poetry.

And the idea is that it's always a balance. When there's a lot of negativity in the world, it is up to us to generate the positivity and shine the light on positivity, shine the light on hope, shine the light on love. And at the end of the day, love overcomes hate. Hate might get the news [01:00:00] headlines and cause fear, and fear is a very strong response, but we're gonna ask you as an artist, as a human, I'm gonna ask you when you think of puppies and kittens.

I can bond over that. You'd have to be a horrible villain to not be like, oh, puppies and kittens. And, and I think with, with that in mind, that we are, we are meant to thrive. And that is one of the lines from one of my poems, uh, prayer of light. So poems are prayers, and I didn't say that, somebody else said that.

I can't remember which ancestors said that poems are prayers and everything that we do can amplify and grow the light. [01:01:00] And in times where tyrants and censorship and book bans are intense, it is our job as artists to live, to live and amplify joy. Now some artists will say, I do whatever I want. I'm an artist.

My job is just to be an artist. And I said, yeah, but what kind of artist do you wanna be? Hmm. Are you the kind of artist that amplifies light? Or are you the kind of artist that amplifies fear?

Dan Dissinger: Hmm.

Jen Cheng: So I am choosing to amplify joy, and that's the important thing for me as a community curator, which is why I hosted holding court as an offsite event for a WP to really amplify queer joy.

Because queer and trans folk need to have a sanctuary where we feel like we can laugh and be [01:02:00] ourselves and not be judged or misunderstood. Or if we are misunderstanding each other, we can sort it out and laugh again. Um, so. I featured Queer and Bipoc poets and authors because there are plenty of queer only spaces or queer center spaces.

There are plenty of Bipoc center spaces, but the intersection of queer and Bipoc was something that I intentionally put out there because I'm at the intersection and I was just talking about this yesterday with a friend who was interested to say, why? Why Queer Joy? What's different that we need to do Queer Joy?

And I, and I said, yeah, I've thought about it. What's the difference between joy, joy and queer joy? Like joy is like the overarching in like giant circle on the Venn diagram and [01:03:00] Queer Joy has a lot more, um. We survived in spite of. Hmm. We are laughing in spite of, we are joy as resistance. And I think all of us allies, non queers can do joy as resistance.

And I think queer joy is ever more important as we are trying to support our marginalized friends and neighbors.

Dan Dissinger: Wow. Wow. This is a perfect place to end this podcast. It's been such a, an amazing experience to have this conversation. So thank you so much, Jen. This is, um, yeah, there's so much. I hope everyone has been relists to this episode.

Take notes. You know, there's gonna be a whole list of sources and everything that was mentioned, books, people, and everything on the website, so [01:04:00] definitely check everything out. Yeah. And you know, it's. Poetry is this month, national poetry month celebrated with whatever poetry and poets that you love.

They're, you know, it's just poetry is important. And it, and write a poem like Jen said, like, just try it out. Like, there's no bad poems. There's no reason to be afraid. Like, go in there, write the thing you wanna write. Um, and thank you so much, Jen. Uh, why don't you let everyone know too, like where they can find you and, you know, and how they can reach out to you if, if anything.

Jen Cheng: Yeah, if you're curious about the backstory, the behind the scenes of my poems, I do have a substack, which you can find. Um, my website is. JEN one N-J-E-N-C as in cat voice, uh, gen c voice.com. And for those of you

on social [01:05:00] media, it's Gen C, voice on Instagram and Blue Sky, and you'll find me on Substack as well.

With that handle, you can find me doing public events, not just in West Hollywood. I do a lot of things in West Hollywood as a resident and poet laureate here, but also around Los Angeles. And there may be times in the year where I fingers crossed I'll probably in New York for conference in the fall. Uh, uh, I know a WP is in Baltimore next year, so, um, hope to meet more.

Curious people meet more poets and writers, and I am sometimes teaching online as well. So, um, you can find me teaching online through the loft literary, or through other writing centers. Um, thank you Dan for having me. Yeah, I would encourage everyone to take the tools that, you know, um, [01:06:00] take some time to give yourself an artist date.

Go wander and be inspired by other artists who been through the creation and editing and polishing process, and know that they've taken time to polish it and that when we are first creating something fresh. It's not the final project, not the final product. Not the final product, and you gotta give yourself time to edit, but also that you are letting your inner child play a lot more than sometimes your inner critic wants to take over.

Oh, very true. To just really talk to your brain and say, okay, inner critic, shh. I'm just gonna listen to a soundscape and write to the soundscape. Or I'm gonna bathe myself in the style of a poet I wanna write in. Or I'm going to just play with words and move words around physically and invite [01:07:00] you to do untraditional ways of tricking your brain to say it's safe enough to be curious and play with the words and do what you want with your poetry.

My name is Jen Cheng. Thank you Dan for inviting me. I'm so. Happy to share more about the process of poetry, and I look forward to hearing from all of you.

Dan Dissinger: Yes, absolutely everyone and all this information will be. Uh, Jen's website and her social media and everything will be in the, in the show notes on the website.

So definitely, um, check that out and check out her Substack, which I'm now subscribed to. And so, and definitely reach out to writing Remix. Uh, we're at writing Remix Pod on Instagram Threads and Blue Sky. You could find writing remix on Substack. You could follow my medium page as well to get the, if you're not signed up for a newsletter, which I do, you know, urge you to, you get, you'll get a note from [01:08:00] me in the newsletter and episode specific, uh, reflection questions.

And if you're not in the newsletter, I will post, I post those on Substack and Medium and the episodes also get posted on Substack. But thank you so much, Jen, once again, and thank you everyone for listening and I'll see you on the next episode.