

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 19

Jericho Brown interview – Episode Transcript

Jericho: I can't write for other people, but I can be enchanted and enlivened by the fact that I don't know who my poems might touch.

[Intro]

Matt: Hello, and welcome to The Resistance. I'm your host, Matt Conner.

Jay: And I am the audio engineer/intro cohost, Jay Kirkpatrick.

Matt: Welcome back, Jay. Today's episode of The Resistance is with one of my favorite poets overall, and the timing is perfect, because he just won the Pulitzer Prize. His name is Jericho Brown, and his most recent book, *The Tradition*, is a devastating yet beautiful work about five years in the making. Jay, what I love about our conversation today with Jericho is not just that we're talking to someone who's so good at what he does, and was just rewarded, rightfully so, for it. But really the whole thing for me was about this idea, like when we talk about resistance, he's also talking about the reward of it, and really the lack of it, right?

Jay: I mean, I love poetry. And the more and more I've listened to him, the more amazed I am by him. I really hadn't known much about him up until this point, so I've been doing the prep for this, and just listening to his conversation, I started listening to him more and more. And the thing I got out of this conversation, specifically, was the question: Is the reward worth the resistance? The things that we are impacted by, and the art and music, all these things, the people had to put it out there with no promise of accolades. With no promise of rewards, no promise of money, compensation, legacy. And that's the thing, maybe all of us, what is it we're doing that we have to do, like the end, when we're looking back at it, we know that it was put within us so that it could come out, and we had to give that to the world.

And I think his struggle, his resistance, he's been doing that with resistance since he was in 5th grade. His first poem was shot down by his teacher. She didn't want to read it in front of the class. And then all the way up. He's still battling it in this area of poetry, which is in itself a naked and raw, there's no cinematic soundtrack to give it more feeling. There's no production to make it a better song when it's not that great. It's just raw, and he has to connect. He's basically given his life to putting what's in him out there, and he's starting to see. He won the Pulitzer Prize. But even now, he's still fighting those battles. And it's battles I feel like we all fight. What is within us; is it worth putting out there if it's never recognized? And I think that it was a beautiful yes, after I listened to this conversation. It was very affirming, because I think it's a question on every artist's mind as he's doing this, or she. Is this worth it?

Matt: I think you're right there. I think Jericho's story is one of a long obedience towards something without any real reward or gain from it. It's feeling the friction of it without having the feeling on the other side. Of course, now he is, and he deserves all these accolades, but it took awhile to get there. And I think that's a real lesson for us.

You're going to hear all this and more. Jericho has a great story, a great speaking style. And if you've never heard his poetry or read it, we wholeheartedly recommend *The Tradition*. It came out in 2019. It won the Pulitzer Prize. He's also the director of Emory University's creative writing program. Here is poet Jericho Brown.

Matt: Jericho, I'd love to start where we start each of our episodes, and that's with our source material from Steven Pressfield's *The War of Art*. Pressfield writes this: "Most of us have two lives: the life we live and the unlive life within us. Between the two stands the resistance." I guess I'm curious for you, what form resistance takes these days, on the other side of maybe releasing *The Tradition*, or as a writer or even as a teacher of writers. What does resistance look like for you in the present?

Jericho: You know, I love this question, because it gives me the chance to talk about ways in which I've changed. I think I'm just much more realistic about who I am and what I'm going to do and the purposes of what poetry can do in people's lives. It's important to me that I pay attention to my past and my present, and that I have an understanding that poetry really did make a difference in my life. And by that, what I mean is that there are real live, 100% on-the-ground poems that I have read that changed my mind about how I was living. And that changed my actions. Poems that I've read that made me a better man. And so I do think that's possible for poetry. But I think that happens to a person who's open to the poem. And I think I was always a person looking for that. I wanted growth from my literature and so that's what I got.

And there's sort of this expectation that poetry, and I think it's really too bad that poetry has to carry so much because of what poetry can do in an individual. People want that to be something poetry can do for masses. But poetry does not work on masses in that way, because it's not a Hallmark card. It's not a political speech. Poetry has to be more complex than the Hallmark card, and it has to tell truth at every inch in ways that the political speech cannot tell truth.

So when I think about resistance today, and I think about what I'm trying to do with my work, and what I hope my work does for me, I'm thinking about my work altering my life. I'm thinking about the ways in which my work allows me to interact with institutions, with capitalism, with a government who very clearly, a nation where I am a citizen but clearly doesn't want my citizenship, with my family, I've always had a fraught relationship with my family. Those kinds of things, Matt, are what my poems allow me. They allow me an opportunity to be myself and to look at myself be myself. And because I can look at myself be myself through my poems, I can correct some things, and I can pay attention to ways in which I have capitulated to systems that are not of use to me. But I can also pay attention to ways in which I have thrown those things off, ways in which I have rebelled against those systems. And that's what poetry, I think, does for everyone. It's also the reason why people are afraid of poetry.

You know, if you go through your entire life doing what this culture tells us to do, this culture tells us not to be vulnerable and not to be intimate. Everywhere you turn. From our music to our movies. You don't want to be made susceptible. And you and I know this is hugely problematic, because if you're not vulnerable, then you never fall in love. What I love about poetry is that it asks for our vulnerability. That's great art. Great art asks for our vulnerability. It asks that we participate. Sort of the difference between watching *Madea Goes To Jail* and watching *Moonlight*. You have to participate when you watch *Moonlight*. You're in it. It doesn't just work on you. You work back, right? And at some point, you have to look at yourself, and look at what you believe, and look at what you think, and you have to evaluate that. What is the use of that particular thought?

So that's a long answer to say that that's how I think about resistance, and that's what I think resistance is. I think everything we do has to start on the individual and personal level. And that's what my poems allow me. And that's what the poems I love allow me. And that's what I hope, though I can't make it happen. But I do hope that that's what my work does in other people. Course, I can't think about other people when I'm writing my poems. If I were to do that, I would be in the realm of writing political speeches. When I'm writing my poems, I have to think about the history of poetry and what I need. But I can't think about satisfying folk.

Matt: It sounds as if you would say even the craft itself is painful. And of course, healing, too, but that there's a level of pain involved even in choosing this as a medium.

Jericho: I think that poets are necessarily the outcast in our society. If we look at the history of poetry in the English language, I mean in any language, really. And if we look at the history of poetry and of poets and what they do and how their work is treated and how they are treated, I think there's something to be said about the way that they stand in society. Even at the level of falling in love, at the level of dating. If you meet somebody, and they ask you, "What do you do?" And you say you're a poet, they look at you crazy. This happens to me. People are like, "What do you do?" People who thought they were going to get some will ask me, what do you do? And I say, "I'm a poet." And they say, "Okay, for real, though. What do you do?" They think I'm lying.

I really do believe that's because of where I'm supposed to be. I cannot write the truth. I cannot make use of language in new and subversive ways unless I'm sort of standing inside of the culture and also at the same time on the rim of culture. And you know, folk don't like people standing around on the rim. What are you doing over there? So yeah, that's painful. It's difficult. But it's also what I signed on for. And I'd rather be a part of that lineage than be a part of a present tense lineage.

I feel like there are poets in this country who are doing – I just gave a reading. Talk about a person really speaking from the margins for her whole entire life. I just gave a reading with Naomi Shihab Nye, who's been a huge influence for me and for my work and for young people all over this country. She's been a person. She's been a way that so many very young people have come to know poetry. And she doesn't pull any punches. She interacts with very, very young people. Kids who are young as 5 years old, all the way to kids in high school. And what she's done, that's what she's made her poetry career about, in large part. And as she has done that, she hasn't done that through telling a bunch of lies. People think when you work with young people, you're supposed to tell a bunch of lies.

I got so angry, I have to say, yesterday, Matt. This is what I really think is wrong with the United States of America. I was looking on Twitter, and you know there were a lot of tweets about, recently was the anniversary of the murder, the assassination, I should probably say, the anniversary of the assassination of Fred Hampton. And you know when you look at what's trending, that's on there, because a lot of people are tweeting about it. And I clicked it, and before you can get to the tweets about Fred Hampton and his assassination this many years later, before you can get to those tweets, you get a kind of a message from Twitter that you have to click. And that message says, "This may contain sensitive material." And I'm thinking to myself, this is history! This is American history! This is literally what happened! The government killed a man because the government feared him, because he told the truth all the doggone time.

So yes, of course it's painful to be in that position, because you'll be misunderstood. But everybody's going to get misunderstood. It's just the poet knows that that's going to happen to him or her.

Matt: You talk about poetry almost in a way that someone may talk about Biblical prophets, as part of a lineage, as standing both in and outside, as part of the critique, always the outsider status.

Jericho: Do I?

Matt: Yeah. I mean, you didn't say Biblical prophet, but does it feel maybe that way to you in some way?

Jericho: I've never thought about it. I mean I do think poets end up speaking to the spiritual realm of a person's life, of my life. I know poets have spoken to the spiritual realm of my life. But I've never thought about it in terms of biblical prophets, although poets in many countries of this world are

persecuted, tortured, and imprisoned in the same way that prophets would have been. So I mean, yeah. I mean, yes.

Matt: What is it about this, like you said, this is what I signed up for, if it is this painful process, if it does leave you as an outsider, if you know you're going to be misunderstood? Is there an internal sense of calling that drives you beyond that friction? Is there just, the love for it all is greater than all the friction? What is at work there to keep you obedient?

Jericho: Oh, it's definitely internal, because you don't know why you can write. You never know why. You never get to know why you can write. You know, people grow up in a single family and have, I don't know, 5 brothers and sisters, and for whatever reason, they're the one that can write. Now, their older or their younger brother or sister is the one who can sing, and they're jealous. [Laughs] Like I wish I could sing! Everybody's got to do what they can do sort of naturally. Somebody else can organize very well.

So for me, that's what's most important. I'm sort of following an inclination. I'll never get to know. I can try to trace it. I can try to give myself a little bit of therapy on stage to see if I can figure it out. There are all sorts of reasons on the ground that I can see, in terms of my childhood, that might have something to do with why I'm a writer. But I'll never get to the base of it. I think I'm a writer from the inside out. I don't think I'm a writer from the outside in. I think something in me sort of automatically turned to the page and turned to language.

I was always enchanted by language. I remember being a kid and hearing my grandmother just speak, just talk, and say things. And it wasn't what she said, it was the way she would say them, the way she would characterize things, the way she would articulate herself that I found enchanting. I would be moved just listening to her, listening to older people talk. Listening to younger people talk. Listening to the way people sounded when they spoke. That enchantment was natural to me. Nobody made that happen to me. I don't know why I had that. So I think that happened from the inside out.

Matt: Do you remember the first attempts at your first poem, or even attempts at writing something toward that?

Jericho: I remember writing a poem and taking it to my fifth grade teacher, Ms. Adkins, and telling her that she should read it in front of the class. And I remember her sort of somehow or another putting me off, sort of delaying her doing what I had asked her to do. And then maybe, maybe sometime in that same week, me going back to her, but it could have been in that same class, right? Me going back, it was all day, those classes. What do people think? Anyway, this is 5th grade, by the way. Me going back to her and saying, "Hey, when are you going to read that poem?"

Matt: Did she ever read it?

Jericho: I remember her turning to me and saying, "It's not very good." And I remember thinking, "What do you know?" I had been reading so much poetry. I was like 10 years old. I felt like I had read all the poetry, Matt, so I really thought I was ready. Like I've been reading poetry since I was very young. I would say definitely was deep as a poetry reader at the age of 8 years old. Walking home from a school that passed the library and stopping at the library instead of going all the way home. Or having a mother who would take me and my sister to the library when she needed to go run errands and couldn't be with us and understood that the library was the, which she's an improvisational genius. She understood the library was the best daycare there ever was, because there was nothing there for books. So we would go in the library, and I wanted to read poems all the time, because they were so short. I wasn't intimidated by them. I also wasn't under the impression that I had to know what was going on in every line. I didn't think I was supposed to know because they were poems. So I could read in this distracted way where I

just sort of got excited about this or that image or this or that piece of saying. This or that piece of way of saying.

When I was a kid, I wrote this poem after having that experience. Because you know, that was 3rd and 4th grade. By the time I was in 5th grade, I was writing poetry, man. Of course, looking back now, it couldn't have been very good. But I still felt like it was, I thought I could really write. So she said, Ms. Adkins, I wish I knew Ms. Adkins' first name, so I could front her ass out. I always do wish I knew. I Could find out. You know, I should find out her first name. I've never thought to find it out. You know, maybe. Things are hard. I would have to go through the trouble. So it might not be that hard, but it would also be like, why are you finding this out? Well, really it's actually just nefarious reasons, right? I mean, Ms. Adkins is probably in her, what, 60s or 70s, she has to be in her 70s. She was a very, very young woman. We all thought she was so pretty. You know when you're a kid, anybody in college is pretty. And she was right out of college, teaching us. So we thought she was so pretty. Anyway, she would not read that poem. And she said, "You know, it's not very good." I don't know why that woman thought that was a thing to say to me. Especially since I'm such a good writer. Like I don't know what she was thinking.

Matt: Come on, Ms. Adkins.

Jericho: Yeah, I just think it's very strange. I think it's very strange. I don't know what she was thinking. Or maybe she just didn't want me to throw my life, everybody's always afraid that people are going to throw their lives away on art. "Oh, if I encourage you about this art, you're going to think, 'Oh, let me go be a poet.'" So stupid. So I read the poem. Somehow or another, I ended up reading the poem. And my classmates clapped. I remember that. And I was like, see? That's an early memory of me writing.

When I was a kid, I would give my mom poems. She would put them on the refrigerator. They would say things about like the sun and flowers. Like my students now. And birds. My students – one sure way to know that a student isn't writing about what they really need to or want to be writing about is how many trees, suns, and flowers [laughs] and birds they have in poems without actually naming those things. And that's sort of how I can automatically show them that they're not really speaking back to their own hearts. They'll say "bird," and I'll say, "What kind of bird?" And they're like, "Huh?" [laughs] Like, what kind of a bird? And they can't tell me, because it's that stereotypical poetry bird, but not an actual bird from their minds, from their hearts, from their lives.

There's nothing wrong with writing about a bird. There's nothing wrong with writing about the sun, moon, the trees. As a matter of fact, given the state of our world, we need to be writing about our trees right now. Looks like there's not much time left for our trees, in all honesty. So we should write about our trees. We should commemorate our trees. We should fight for our trees. But we should also know what kind of a tree. We should make that tree real and not just a stereotypical tree. And that's the difference between poems and, as I said before, Hallmark cards. That's the difference between poems and political speeches.

Matt: Jericho, I wanted to ask you about, obviously, *The Tradition* is your latest work. I read, you said once about it, "The book really chased me around. I thought that it was going to kill me. It wanted every inch of me." That feels almost opposite of resistance, as if something in you is dying to get out. When I feel like so much of the creative process for so many, whether writing or painting or songwriting, whatever, is about mining for the material and hoping something's there. Here, it sounded like you had something clamoring to get out. So did resistance just not exist during that time? Are you just like receiving some waterfall of, standing in the flow, as they say? Can you take us there, and the feeling, and that relationship to resistance?

Jericho: It was weird, because it was the best and the worst thing that had ever happened to me. Quite honestly, Matt, I could not stop writing. And I was afraid, because of it, because it had never been so completely effortless and so completely exhausting. You know, writing, people don't know this. They don't think I work. I work, honey. The discipline that it takes to get writing done, and the feeling of it, when you work on a poem and you're done with it. And by done with it, I mean, you know, even at the stage of a first draft, you feel like oh my god, I could sleep for six days. And this was happening to me day after day. Many days in a row, I would draft several poems in the span of a day. And this was happening during the semester, which is, you know people complain that they can't get any writing done during the semester, and yet I was complaining that I was getting so much writing done during the semester. Because I wasn't sleeping.

I had this new job. I'm Director of Creative Writing. So I had this new administrative position, which meant I was having to be on campus at 8 and 9 in the morning or 10 in the morning for meetings, which means I had to go to bed at a decent hour. It was very different for me. But I wasn't going to bed at a decent hour. I was getting up for these meetings, and then every second, I would be on an elevator pulling out the notes app of my iPhone, trying to get a poem down. I was sort of in a dream haze all the time. I would write until sometimes 5 in the morning, and then I would try to take what must have been a nap before my alarm went off at 6:30. It was the most fruitful thing. It was so beautiful. I felt like land. A plot of land, where spring is here, and you are a plot of land, Jericho, and you've got no choice. You're going to flower. I felt like a meadow. And I didn't really feel like it was up to me. And I sort of just had to keep up as it was happening.

And that's probably how I finished, that is how I finished, I would say something like 60, definitely not 50%, something like 60, 65% of the book. I had written a lot of the book sort of through the years. My last book came out in 2014. And somewhere between 2014 and 20—I would say, yes, 17, probably 40% of the book. And I was slowly, as I do, I was slowly getting poems done. Not really rushing myself. And then suddenly, I think I wrote most of *The Tradition* between Thanksgiving of 2017 and Martin Luther King Day of 2018. I mean, I was really, when the holidays came and we weren't in session in the semester, I was really just, I just gave my life to it. I was like, it's here, so I'd better finish it.

I remember in November, calling my editor and saying, "Michael, I think I've got something." He had been bothering me, too. He had called me in August, and then he called me in September, and then he called me in October, and each time he was calling me, he was like, "Do you have anything?" And I was like, "No." I was really getting frustrated. I was going to bite him. He was making me so angry. You know, I'm a slow poet, Matt. So I was already buried, like, leave me alone. I'm trying to write my book here. I don't need you rushing me.

Then November came, and I called him, and he was like, "No. I called you, and I asked you." [laughs] But I sent him some poems that I had been working on. He was like, "Oh my god. When do you think you're going to finish?" I was like, "At the rate I'm going?" So yeah, I got it done. I was done with this thing in 2018, all of a sudden, in ways I really didn't think I would be done until, at the earliest, '20. Things worked out and for whatever reason.

I really think, quite honestly, Matt, I really think it was because, I usually write because I'm in some situation that is prohibiting my writing. I remember when I was in school, whenever it was time for finals, and I was supposed to be studying something else, I would suddenly have all these poems to get done. So one of the things that was happening that I think made for me writing all these poems was that I was reading a bunch of fiction that I had to read, because we were hiring a fiction writer at Emory. So I read more books of fiction than I had ever read in my entire life. And there was something about it that was very beautiful but something about it that kept getting on my nerves.

You know, poetry is so lovely a genre. You sort of know, dealing with a book of poetry, I would say 3 pages in. You sort of have an idea. This is the world. This is what I'm dealing with. You can sort of begin to evaluate it. Books of fiction are quite different. You might be 60 pages in before that thing gets good. You have to be patient with it in different ways. I just, oh my goodness. My nerves were bad. So I kept, in the midst of all of that, trying to write poems, because I felt like I was going to lose that other kind of language that I was used to and that I'm more attracted to, more than I am to prose.

Matt: Jericho, one more for you. When you're in the midst of that kind of a creative flow, how do you know when the editing needs to stop, and when to set it free? Is there just an internal feeling of, all right, this is finished. Because I'm assuming you could infinitely work on line after line.

Jericho: You know, the most important thing that we have to remember all of our lives, and this is a message to the poets and a love letter to the poets when I say this, you just have to be there for your friends. You have to have friends on the west coast. You have to be on the east coast working at 3am and have a friend who's on the west coast who's a poet, and who can look at something and tell you to leave it alone. If you're on the west coast, you have to have a friend in Hawaii.

That sounds sort of glib, I guess, but it's true. I mean this about community. I mean this about friendship. That we have to be there for one another. We have to realize that people are there for us. We have to allow ourselves to get and to have, to have and to get, and to use help. I do this by myself. I write these poems. But then again, I don't do this by myself. I work within a community. A community that goes back as far as Gwendolyn Brooks, as Phyllis Wheatley, as Milton. I have a community there.

People that I come from that have given me some example of how to do this. I have poems that were written long, long before I was born that work as my guide. And I have a present tense. Today. Now. Current. Community. I have poets all over this country and this world who love me. Some people who have never met me. You know, me knowing this is the very thing; I can't write other people. But I can be enchanted and enlivened by the fact that I don't know who my poems might touch.

I gave a reading last night. It was really beautiful. This is hard for me to talk about. I hope I don't start crying in the middle of the podcast. Oh my god. Really beautiful, this young man, he's in college here. I gave a reading at the University of Maine, Farmington. Young man comes up to me to sign his book after the reading. He says, "You know, I have your book for class, but can you sign this one to my mother? She loves your poems. And I'm going to give her this one." And so I signed the book. I'll never forget. I signed the book, "To Julia." And after I signed the book to Julia, I was thinking, wow. Like, Julia's this kid's mom, and she's reading my poems, and this kid is reading my poems.

I can't hope for anything better in that world. That's two generations of one family. Who would have thought? So that's an energy. That's an energy that I get. I am living on that. I can't touch it, I don't know it's there. Every once in awhile, I might get some glimmer about its existence, but we are living on, all of us, not just me.

I mean, sometimes it can be made more evident to me, but my dad used to say this thing. We don't know whose prayers are getting through. We don't know whose prayers we're living on. And there are prayers that were prayed for me even before I was born. There are people who thought about the fact of my existence, the possibility that I can have, that maybe they did not have, no maybe about it with my ancestors, right? And I think that's the energy on which I live.

I live on other people's prayers. Mine help. The fact that I feed myself and try to stay healthy helps. The fact that I take care of myself helps. The fact that I find time for prayer and meditation helps. But I also have the energy of people I'll never know and I'll never meet. And I depend on that. And I'm aware of

that. And I think the more we are aware of that, the better we can understand that we're not doing anything we're doing alone.

And so the way you know you're done with a poem, to answer your question, is that you reach out to people, and you ask them to read, you quite literally ask for help, and you allow people to help you. And sometimes that help is present, and sometimes that help is somehow other world.

[music]

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