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From Norman, Oklahoma, I'm Suzette Grillot, the dean of the College of International Studies at the University of Oklahoma. Welcome to World Views at CIS.

On today's program, we'll hear from two participants in the University of Oklahoma's Neustadt festival – the 2017 winner of the NSK Neustadt prize for Children's Literature, Marilyn Nelson...

Poetry is about specific things. It doesn't start with the idea of being universal.

As well as a member of the Neustadt jury, author Dipika Mukherjee...

Poetry has actually been my companion from childhood.

Marilyn Nelson is an educator, poet and author. World Literature Today describes Nelson as one of America's most powerful literary voices. A professor emerita at the University of Cincinnati, Nelson has written or translated more than a dozen works of literature. She has been recognized with numerous awards and honors, such as the Newbery Honor, Coretta Scott King Honor, Guggenheim fellowship, and Frost Medal. She has also been a finalist for the National Book Award three times.

Marilyn Nelson, welcome to World Views.

Thank you very much.

Well, Marilyn, first of all, let me congratulate you on winning this year's NSK Prize in Children's Literature. It's always such a pleasure to welcome the prize winners to campus for the Neustadt Prizes. So welcome and congratulations.

Thank you.

I'm so excited to talk to you today about your work. Let's just kind of start maybe closer to the beginning, Marilyn, about your upbringing. I've read that you were drawn to poetry in elementary school. You started writing poems in elementary school, which is not all that common. I don't think. I don't know. Tell me about that. What drew you to writing poetry and in particular to ultimately writing a memoir telling your family story, your history through poetry, which is a very interesting approach.

I think it was a reader of poetry. I discovered it when I was very young and fell in love and had a dream of someday having a poem published in a book, and it just grew that desire. I don't even know if I could call it an ambition.

is it that you loved about poetry or love now about poetry? What really made you go, "This is what I want to be. This is what I want to do."

I think what I loved initially were the sounds of poetry, the rhythms, the rhymes, the music of poetry and the way, oh, if you love poetry, when you say a line, it fills your mouth somehow with beautiful sounds that give pleasure. "I must go down to the sea again to the lonely sea and the sky, and all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by," that is something I probably read for the first time when I was ten. We had

a Childcraft set of books and they were illustrated poems and one volume, and on the page of that poem, which is *Sea Fever* by John Maysfield, there's just a beautiful painting of a sail boat on a kind of rough sea. I can still see the page and the boat. And at that point, I was thinking, I'd grow up and be a sailor. So that's what started me. I think with poetry, the sounds, the music. And I think also the way you can visualize what a poem is describing. I was seeing things when I read poems.

It was all the senses, really what you're hearing, what you're seeing, what you're feeling, all those things coming together. Just listening to you, recite that poem, it's like you almost take on a whole different, you know, persona, it's definitely artistic, a performance. And as you said, the words fill your mouth, but it's also, poems also have meaning typically. The wonderful poem you mentioned and how the meaning of the poem or the substance of the poem was about the sailor. But your work has been described, and I want to get back to your memoir in a minute, but your work has been described as quietly lyrical, simple whispers. I can hear this in your voice as you recite your poetry, exactly what people are saying about your work, but straightforward stories. Now, when I think of poetry and the poetry that I've read often, I wouldn't necessarily characterize it as being straight forward, the poem that you just recited seems pretty straightforward, but poets can also be very complex, deal with very difficult subjects. As somebody else has said about your work, complex and weighty ideas and experiences. That your work covers weighty things, but also in a simple way, how do you do that? Is that just a gift that just comes out, or is there a craft there that you can develop, and how to take tough subjects and turn them into poetry?

Well, sometimes I secretly worry that the accessibility of my poems indicates an intellectual limitation. I'm not sure about that, but I've told several times about... I had a great uncle who was a president of a college for some 30 years, one of the historically Black colleges. He was the President at Kentucky State College. When I was in college, I sent him a sheaf of my poems which were heavily influenced by TS Elliot, at the time. I sent him some poems and asked him what he thought of them. And he wrote me a very sweet note back in which he asked, "why don't young poets nowadays write poems that people like me can understand." And I thought, "oh, this is a man, he's a university president. Why am I not writing poems that he can understand? And uh, that just why? Why does poetry have to be that way?" And I think what my uncle's question made me realize is that poetry traditionally was something for people. It was something for people to enjoy. It wasn't something that had to be limited to the classroom. I think that I'm kind of a throwback to an earlier generation of writers, of poets.

So let's talk about a couple of your works. I mentioned at the beginning, your memoir that you published in 2014, *How I Discovered Poetry*. This is a series of 50 poems about growing up in the 1950s in a military family. And each poem is stamped with a place, a date where you lived, including actually in Oklahoma. You lived at one point with your military family in Oklahoma. Let me also point out that I read about you, that you are the daughter of one of the last Tuskegee Airman. Your mother was a teacher. You know you obviously had this... you moved around, you had a mom as an educator, a dad who did amazing things. Tell us about that experience of, first of all, writing a memoir, that's 50 poems, because it's probably the first time I've ever encountered such a thing. And then what can we expect when we look at this memoir of yours?

Let me, first of all, add the fact that my mother was born and raised in Oklahoma, so my family has deep roots in Oklahoma. My mother grew up in Boley, which is one of the, I think, two or three all black towns in the state. She grew up on a farm and her mother was also a teacher. She taught in a Creek Seminole school near Boley. So, our connection with the state goes back a couple of generations. I started writing this book... Actually, I didn't intend it to be in memoir, it was in my mind to be a book about The 50s, and I wrote a couple of poems and sent them to an editor friend who said, "yeah, nobody's going to be interested in your book about the 50s. They'd be more interested in your book about yourself in the 50s." So I changed my focus and made myself the center, but each of the poems are almost all of the poems are intended to illustrate something about the history that we were living through in the 50s. The Cold War,

for example, is a part of it, or the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement is a part of it, and I had hoped that when young people read these poems, they will not only relate to the child who is the speaker of the poems, but that they will also understand some of the tensions that were going on in the country during this period. I was very much influenced by a book I happened upon, I don't remember the author's name, but the title of the book was something like, *My Life and What I was Wearing*, and every little chapter of the book begins with the drawing of the dresses, the clothes, this woman was wearing. "My first day of school, I wore address my mother sewed for me, and here's the dress," And then we get the story about her first day of school. And I loved that. And when I started writing this book, every poem not only had a place marker, but also had a description of the outfit that I was wearing at the time. And we decided that was too much information. So we dropped that.

Oh, so interesting. The things that you're writing about at that time, you're writing about war. You mentioned the Cold War, tensions, civil rights. These are things. . . . I guess I like to end is on the universal nature of poetry. We started before our recorded conversation talking about how you really hadn't done in the international work, but poetry is a universal thing and you meet people from around the world. They're always moved by poetry from their own home countries or from other parts of the world, and poetry like fiction and other types of writing, reflects issues that are universal, like the fight for civil rights, or war and conflict, and political economic and other social tensions. Can you maybe just speak a little bit about the universal nature of poetry? And even though you were writing this memoir and other things about specific things and specific times, what is your thinking about how poetry transcends time and place?

I think I would say that the universality that poetry can achieve has to do with a specificity. Poetry is about specific things. It doesn't start with the idea of being universal. It starts with the idea of being small and specific, not general, but describing one single thing, and by doing that, opening that one single thing so that readers can enter that single experience and discover in it their own experiences. And it's that discovery that creates the sense of universality. I think. . . . I remember one of my professors saying that poetry rediscovers reality for us. It's not big, it's small. And when we recognize the reality, the small reality that we have lived, then we see it differently, we see our own lives differently, and we connect with larger experiences through the small experiences.

As you were talking, I wrote down, "connections," that what it does is it does connect us. It connects us to other people. Those specific instances that poetry reflects connects to other people and places the times. It's so beautiful the way you put that. Thank you so much, Marilyn for being here today. Congratulations again on this very prestigious and much deserved award and it was delightful to speak with you anything so much.

Thank you.

You have been listening to my conversation with Marilyn Nelson, an educator poet, and author who won the NSK Neustadt prize for Children's Literature. For more about Marilyn Nelson's work or to leave a comment or question about this conversation, you can visit our website at cisworldviews.com.

Next, I'll speak with Dipika Mukherjee. Dipika describes herself as a writer, sociolinguist, and nomad. She's a faculty affiliate at the Buffet Institute for Global Studies at Northwestern University. Her novels include *Thunder Demons*, *Ode to Broken Things* and *Shambala Junction*.

Dipika Mukherjee, welcome to World Views.

Thank you.

Well, I'm going to start first with just what you do and how you are described. You're a writer, poet and a sociolinguist. I'd love to hear what sociolinguist is. What does that mean?

Alright, yeah, a sociolinguist is basically someone who looks at how language and society intersect. Basically, what that means is my research for my doctoral dissertation was on how women in a migrant community in Malaysia have been changing their language to reflect identity issues, as well as because of the political climate out there. So it's like how their language was changing because of social and political needs. I've also been doing some research in for instance, the maintenance of the Shanghai dialect in China. Because there's a one language only policy in China as we all know, but the Shanghai dialect is economically very viable. So there's a lot of grassroots movements. I've also worked with the women and Amsterdam and gone into a Bollywood class to look at how their language among the Sierinese and the Sianese in Amsterdam has been changing. So that's kind of stuff I do.

So very interesting. Now, can you give us some examples? In particular, I'm referring back to the migrant communities in Malaysia that you spoke about. How they were changing their language because of social and political needs. For example, what are you exactly talking about there?

Well, if we take... what I was looking at was particularly the Malaysian Bengali community and be Bengali as a language in Malaysia has absolutely no economic currency. You cannot use it in the workplace, because it's very much a home language. So the women who were just in an older age group would hold on to it because a very traditional reasons for wanting to teach their children, and perhaps grandchildren and holding on to cultural ties. So that gave them a sort of social currency within the community. But in terms of the younger women who wanted to get ahead in business and in the workplace, in order to be working with a government concern, you had to be very good in Malay. But in order to do that, you had to be ethnic Malay as well because there's a lot of political issues with who can work in government and... well actually more with the glass ceiling in government organizations. So these women would very often prefer to work in multinational corporations, which required English. So they would very often give up the other languages to make their English really strong. So there were all kinds of these factors coming into play, which was really interesting. And I looked at about 14 women over a period of about 16 months and tracked them in social situations and private interviews, as well as in community gatherings to get a sense of how things are really changing.

Yeah, really, in some ways, obviously, language is such a reflection of culture, but it's also a reflection of one's social, political and economic context, just referring to your Chinese work in Shanghai, and working on dialectics. I've spent some time in Chinese. I studied Mandarin Chinese and lived in Beijing. So I had the Beijing pronunciation. When I went to Shanghai, of course I couldn't understand at all or communicate with anyone. Of course, I don't speak a lot of Chinese, but I just was there long enough to learn a little bit, but I learned enough to know that you can't really communicate easily. But this is true of any... a lot of places you go.

Absolutely, that's a good point because I think my work, since I got my... since I finished my dissertation in 1995, it's dating me a bit, but it was really based on some researchers who were working in the 1960s, Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, who said that all our kind of, language were acts of identity. So depending on the community or the group that we are speaking to at that time, we sort of perform an identity for that particular group. So we are all in a sense, capable of many different kinds of language, many different kinds of register, and we just pick them out and use them. So when I'm teaching class, for instance, I kind of give them the example of, you know when they send an email to a professor, it would be very different from when they would be texting their friends. So we all know how to do this. So some communities in the world, they just do it in a multilingual way. Some people are monolingual, but we are all capable of these shifting acts of identity. Absolutely.

And we all do it, like you said, I'm just thinking in my own mind of how we do this and how it's internalized. And it's something that we don't even really recognize. It's just kind of auto pilot.

Unconscious completely. Yeah, absolutely.

Let's talk a little bit about some of your edited collections of Southeast Asian fiction, and it's described to Southeast Asian fiction. And I guess I want to ask a little bit more about that. Why label something Southeast Asian fiction? It's not just fiction that's coming from Southeast Asia. Is there something in particular, or is it just... it's origin?

Yes. I think one of the things that got me started on a literary journey was in 2002, I was commissioned by Penguin India to come out with an internationally marketed anthology on Singaporean and Malaysian fiction. It was finally titled, *The Merlion and the Hibiscus*, and we sort of gathered the best juries from Malaysia and Singapore, and just that entire experience... at that time I was teaching in Singapore, and that's how I even got this... sort of gig, so to speak. So it got me thinking about how the stories from Southeast Asia are just completely still undiscovered by the English speaking world. And it was a fascinating journey to find these wonderful writers, some of whom I, of course, knew very well because I was living in Singapore and I've got a lot of ties to Malaysia as well, but to actually frame this with an anthology and then present the best to the world. And then Penguin, of course, has been marketing it very well. So that got me thinking that when we talk about these Asian voices, whether it's South Asia, Southeast Asia, anywhere, when you think of Europe, and a lot of people know Europe already. And if you talk about, let's say the variety in Europe, whether it's between Brussels or Amsterdam, and maybe Berlin, there's really not that much of a difference in terms of food, language and things like that. But if you take a place like Southeast Asia, like Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, you really kind of are looking at very different types of government, different languages and their folk tales also reflect a reflect that kind of diversity. So one of the things that I did after this Penguin anthology was I also worked with a smaller publisher there called Silverfish, and we did a Malaysian anthology of new voices. And lately my latest project has been since 2015, I've been running the DK Dutt Literary Award for excellence in Malaysia. And that has been bringing out a lot of Malaysian voices. And what I'm extremely proud of is our 2015 winner, she's a young woman with two children under the age of four. And so she won this contest and she's a very traditionally dressed woman. She covers her head and very sort of when you look at her picture, she... this looks very traditionally Malay, but she went on to write a young adult novel after winning this prize that we had started, and it was bought up by Simon and Schuster, and she has an agent in New York, and now she's going global. And so I'm very proud to the fact that you won this contest and sort of got kick started into all this. So I think that the kind of voices that we have when I go to these literary conferences, and right now I'm coming from Singapore and Bali and various Southeast Asian conferences. When I ask a room, how many people have read anything from Myanmar? Very few people really have or Laos or Cambodia. And so there's just such a minefield and Asians make up 60% of the world population. So there's just so so much still undiscovered, and I am making it one of my priorities to find these voices.

What I'm hearing you say over and over again, are "voices and new voices," and in fact on your website, and I wrote this down, is that you love finding new Asian slash American voices. And I have two questions about that. One, you kind of already answered finding new voices, trying to provide some entry for them. That's what you've been doing through these collections and through the work that you've been doing all around the world, trying to overcome the barriers to entering the literary world, I guess for these new voices. Is there anything that you meant by Asian slash American Voices and not Asian hyphen American Voices because that's different. Asian American voices versus Asian slash American voices.

Yes, is it? Well, in my mind, sometimes maybe I just conflate the two is it's really not that different. But then I think what happened is... I live in Chicago, I've been living in Chicago now for six years, and I just

love the literary vibe of that city. I just absolutely love it. But one of the things that we started on, I think it's been going for about three years or maybe a little more... is the Chicago literary guild, and they invited me to start an Asian American reading series, which sort of brought new voices again to the four. And so this was just something where we invited about three people to read, and then there was an open mic as well before that, for anybody else who wanted to read. We haven't done that for a while because the guild had sort of a change over in management. And I've also been traveling more with my novels being out recently and things. But one of the things that I find very exciting again is to find these voices who are either in Chicago already are transiting through Chicago. So they don't really necessarily have to be Asian American with hyphen in between. They could be just Asians. And for instance, I had Rachel DeWoskin on my show who's American, but she's lived in Shanghai for many years and she's done these wonderful books things about being in Shanghai and being a very unexpected TV star out there. So again, she doesn't fit that Asian hyphen American, but she's been on the show. So the other thing that we've also started is there's an Asian American group that meets in people's homes, and we're all writers of different kinds, and we've been trying to meet about once every two months and just kind of support each other and just create a community. And that's been really great for me too. Yeah.

Well, I wonder if this is related at all because I have to ask, I have a read it yet, but one of your two poetry collections is entitled *The Third Glass of Wine*. Tell us a little bit about the title of that and a lot bit about your poetry and what that reflects. And is that related at all to this notion of support network? Is that what it's coming out of in anyway?

The Third Glass of Wine actually comes from a poem that's titled *The Third Glass of Wine*, and it really talks about the leap of poetry, how it just takes you out of where you are, who you are, and it's a combustible flight. I think the word that I use out there. So yeah, that comes from an actual poem, but poetry has actually been my companion from childhood. And I published my first poem and the children's part of a newspaper in Wellington, New Zealand when I was about 11 years old, and even now, I think poetry keeps coming back. My first chat book collection was picked up by Rubin Ruby compress in Canada, and they just did this wonderful little chat book and they treated with so much love. So I think that poetry, I've always found has given me back something that really feeds my soul, and it's still something that I feel I can write at the worst times and at the best times. So the most recently in Bali, I was in a monetary, and it just felt so meditative that I just wrote three poems and you can't do that with the novel. You have to sort of plan it all out and you have to stress over it and you have to edit it. Whereas I think with poetry, sometimes you just write something and you're pleased with it. Yeah.

Well Dipika, it sounds like we've come full circle really back to where you began, poetry being a companion of yours and feeding your soul from the very beginning. So thank you so much for sharing your work with us today for being here. It was very fascinating and I look forward to reading more of your work.

Thank you, Suzette. It was such a pleasure.

You have been listening to my conversation with Dipika Mukherjee about her work as a sociolinguist and her love for discovering new Asian American Voices.

For more information about Dipika Mukherjee visit our website at cisoworldviews.com, where you can also leave a comment about this conversation. We would always love to hear your thoughts and comments about this show. You can follow us on Facebook and Twitter @cisworldviews, and you can follow me @suzettegrillot. World Views at CIS is produced by the College of International Studies at the University of Oklahoma. Kaitie Holland prepares our research and Jacque Braun produced the show. For all of us at the College of International Studies and the World News program, I'm Suzette Grillot.