



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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*“Canaries embroidered
the night.”*

*Three babies arrived
laughing.*

*In my mother’s house,
a safe hoards 100 gold
rings.”*

-from “In the Tunnel of
Falling Birds,” by
Elizabeth Rosner, poet

Sometimes a question comes up that is so appealing it makes me want to engage in long conversations with everyone I know as I try to figure out how I feel about it. This happened at a recent poetry reading at our library, when the featured poet – Elizabeth Rosner – asked if we wanted to know the history of a poem. Is it relevant? she asked us. Is it important to know?

Although there was some brief discussion, it wasn’t really possible to explore this issue at the reading - but I have been thinking about it every since. And the fact that this question fits in so well with a similar topic in one of my classes makes this even more appealing to me. The class discussion was not about the background of a work, but the background of an author. Should it be relevant to our appreciation of a piece of writing? Should we take it into account?

My first exposure to that question was in a conversation about Robert Frost. I grew up

listening to Frost poetry; in fact, the first word I ever read was “totters,” from Frost’s “The Pasture.” And there was a kind of reverence for this man in our house – for the far reach of his work and the wisdom of his words. But there are numerous accounts about Frost’s personal life that could easily taint his work. The question is: Should they? Should we allow our opinion of someone’s private life and perhaps abhorrent behavior to color our view of the work? Is it relevant?

I would emphatically say no, even though I know there are times I am affected by some anecdote about a public figure and it changes my opinion of them. I can see why it would be difficult to separate an artist’s actions from his or her work – but I still don’t believe it’s appropriate.

The same holds true for the story behind a work of art – a poem, for instance. As one of my daughters commented, if you need to know the reasons

the poem was written, then the writer isn't doing her job. My daughter's recommendation was to read the poem, hear the background, and then read the poem again. That makes sense to me – as long as the second reading doesn't eradicate the feelings from the first one. And perhaps the background and the second reading would give us insight not only into the author's intent, but also even a glimpse into the way another reader may experience the work. We may end up with multiple meanings and I think this would be a good thing. A good piece of writing holds many possibilities – that is what gives it depth and longevity.

Even having some knowledge of a writer's background can affect how we interpret their work. Elizabeth Rosner's poetry is a good example of this. Since I know her parents are Holocaust survivors, when she uses the word “gold” in a

poem, I immediately remember those too-vivid war images - in particular, gold fillings, gold watches, and gold wedding bands. I imagine them in piles, next to abandoned suitcases and strewn clothing. Because of this, it is difficult for me to disregard the impact of Rosner's past – it has colored that word for me.

I think we are all like that – when we read the poet's words, we see not only the dictionary definition, but also the emotions from our own lives. That is the pleasure of a good poem – it speaks to all of us.