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## AN INTERVIEW WITH KENTUCKY POET JOY BALE-BOONE

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Joy Bale-Boone is the author of two collections of poetry, *Never Less Than Love* (1972) and *Even Without Love* (1992), and a narrative poem, *The Storm's Eye: A Narrative in Verse Celebrating Cassius Marcellus Clay, Man of Freedom, 1810-1903* (1974). For over sixty years, she has written poems about beauty, love, and family (to and about her parents, her six children, and her fifteen grandchildren).

In addition to writing poetry, Joy Bale-Boone has been a patron of the arts in Kentucky for many of her eighty-plus years. She founded the poetry magazine *Approaches* in 1964 (later called *Kentucky Poetry Review*) which continued for almost thirty years; she has reviewed books for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and other publications for more than fifty years; she hosted a syndicated radio program, *Looks at Books*, on WIEL in Elizabethtown for ten years; she served as president of the Friends of Kentucky Libraries and as a member of the Kentucky Educational Television Advisory Board, the Kentucky Council on Higher Education, the Editorial Board of the University Press of Kentucky, and the Kentucky Humanities Council. In 1969 she received the University of Kentucky Sullivan Award for the Outstanding Citizen of the state of Kentucky.

Joy Bale-Boone is currently serving as chair of the Robert Penn Warren Committee at Western Kentucky University and as a member of the board of the Robert Penn Warren Circle of Duke University. She is a director of the Thomas Clark Foundation of the University Press of Kentucky and a member of the Board of the Gaines Center for the Humanities at the University of Kentucky.

Born to English parents in Chicago in 1912, Bale-Boone lived only a few blocks from the office of Harriet Monroe, founder of *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*. At sixteen, she found her way to Monroe's office, introduced herself, and asked for comments on her poetry. Monroe saw promise in Bale-Boone's poetry and encouraged her to keep writing.

She met Kentucky native, Shelby Garnett Bale, while he was attending medical school at Northwestern University. After their marriage in 1934 and a few years of further medical training in New York City, Louisville, and Lynch, Kentucky, she moved with him to Elizabethtown, Kentucky. Her poetry from this period reflects her husband's roots in Green and Larue Counties, her proximity to the central Kentucky city of Louisville, and her growing family: Shelby, Jr., was born in 1936, Barbara in 1939, Daryl in 1941, Richard in 1942, Bradley in 1948, and Phillip in 1950. At this time Bale-Boone's family began spending several weeks each summer at the island they named Balewick, twenty-five miles by water from Kenora, Ontario. In the early 1970s, Bale-Boone also spent some time with her husband at Lyme Regis, the little fishing village on the border of Dorset and Devon in

southwest England. She returned to Lyme Regis several more times after the death of her husband in 1972. In 1975 she married George Street Boone and moved to his native Elkton, Kentucky, where she lives today.

The following transcript is based on a conversation held October 25, 1994, at the home of Joy Bale-Boone's son Shelby Bale in Glasgow, Kentucky.

LMM: How did you become interested in poetry?

JBB: I really can't pinpoint it. I think maybe poets are just born with a certain way of thinking because looking back I believe I wrote my first poem when I was ten or twelve. It was rather embarrassing--at least I find it so now. It was terribly expressive. My mother loved it--she was so pleased that I had written something--and had it placed in the church bulletin. Well, I'm glad my way of writing has changed. But I don't remember anything except always loving poetry.

When I was twelve and in my early teens, I'd go to the public library in Evanston, Illinois, and because hardly anybody checked out poetry even then, I could take any number of poetry books home. I'd have my arms loaded with poetry books. I'd be in my room that night typing out lines from my favorite poems, I'm afraid my parents thought doing my homework. I still have the scrapbooks, five of them. There were all sorts of pieces of poetry. I was just always excited by poetry.

LMM: I understand that you once met Harriet Monroe?

JBB: That was the nice thing about where I was born. Maybe that's why I was interested in poetry. I was born in Chicago on a street called Dearborn, which is pretty nice, and eight blocks away Harriet Monroe--I, of course, learned a few years later--was starting *Poetry* magazine. It was just called *Poetry*, and it is still one of the leading poetry magazines or journals in the world. It's just a wonderful one. Of course, she's gone now, but it has been kept up by succeeding editors. When I was just in my teens, I met Harriet Monroe. I know hardly anyone's heard of her--it's not like Elvis Presley or something--but to someone interested in poetry, she's just one of the wonders of the world. So maybe I was just--some people might say *doomed* to poetry--I'll say *destined* to poetry. She was a very quiet, seemingly unassuming woman, but of course full of fire or else how could she have done all she did with words? I feel very lucky. I wish I could have known her--I wish I could have been in her magazine!

But then after I married I moved to New York City a while and worked. After we settled in Kentucky, which was my husband's home, babies started coming and I didn't actively pursue poetry until the children were fairly grown. Of course, I was writing all along. Then started the Kentucky poetry magazine. That was exciting! It was 1964, and I couldn't understand why there weren't any poetry magazines in Kentucky because by then I knew Kentucky so well I knew there had to be poets lurking around in the woods and hiding their poems under leaves, maybe, this time of year. There was not a single poetry publication in Kentucky then except the poems that would appear in college or university magazines which mostly carried essays or fiction. So I thought I'd like to do an anthology of Kentucky poems, but where were they? So it occurred to me to get in touch with librarians because they would really know who came in and wanted poetry and maybe even had confided that they wrote it. The librarians responded beautifully, and I ended up with a list of poets, mostly in eastern Kentucky, which in a way is not surprising because people are a little closer to the earth there. So I wrote to these people, and most of them sent

poems. The anthology sold out in six weeks. Can you imagine? It was a hardback!

Than many of the people who were in it wrote to me asking if there weren't some way they could go on sharing each other's work. So I had a friend across the street who was very artistic and loved poetry--didn't write it--and she also sketched, and so I asked her if she'd be interested in trying. We put out the first issue, then called *Approaches*; it became *Kentucky Poetry Review*. It was the most miserable-looking thing you ever saw. We didn't have money, so it was a moonlight job. In today's world of desk computers, you can practically do good publishing in your own home. I looked so horrible we were ashamed to send it out, so we didn't. At our own expense, we had a decent-looking copy made. From then on, it just kept going and got better and better. But we never changed our policy of including only Kentucky poets, which sounds terribly insular, but they just hadn't had a chance before. After that magazine started, poetry magazines have proliferated in Kentucky. Western Kentucky University has *Plainsong*, a very good magazine.

LMM: Wasn't it about this time when you were involved in a poetry group?

JBB: After the magazine started, poets in that area would meet in people's homes. Most of these poets were in Louisville. It was too far for the eastern Kentucky or western Kentucky poets to come. We had wonderful times. We'd bring works in progress or a recently written poem. We would read it, and the whole group would discuss it. And with one exception I never knew anyone to have their feelings hurt. But there are a few poets who, if you misplace a comma, are real upset and very often have a right to be. Punctuation is as important in poetry as almost any other part. A comma can make a big difference. Amazing--that's part of the fun of poetry.

LMM: Do you think the poetry group influenced your poetry?

JBB: Oh, yes. We all stimulated each other so much. I'd go home and, all of a sudden, here were three or four poems knocking at my door, interfering with my housework and child care. I would stay up late and take care of the poems too. I think it influenced my poetry and everybody's because everyone was so outspoken. The thing that came through the most, the criticism to everybody, was, "Why did you make it so long? You said it all in the first three stanzas." It made us tighten up our poetry and give it more impact. "Why did you add those last two lines? Do you think your readers are idiots and can't get the point? Let them fill in with their feelings." No particular style. Everybody has a different thing to say and a different way of saying it. We could always make it a little better. Our friends who are also poets could help with it.

I never felt I was influenced by any one writer except when I was very young. That was in my teens. It was the time of Dorothy Parker, Ogden Nash, Sara Teasdale. The love poems were always heartbroken. It was a cynical time, oddly enough, not cynical the way politics is today: "Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses." It sounded cynical, but just part of the time.

LMM: How do you actually write a poem?

JBB: It starts in my head. The poem comes to me, and then I do work with paper and pencil. Oh, Lord, this is going to shock so many people, but I don't use a word processor. Everybody thinks you should do that now. But

the way I've done it suited me. I work it out with paper and pencil. Then I start typing it. Some poems take an endless number of rewritings, and some are almost there to begin with.

That's what I like about love poems--they're lyrics. Sometimes I wake up in the morning, and they almost get up with me. They're easy and quick to do if they catch me--some get thrown away.

Most of my friends who write say, "Word processors! You wouldn't have to retype!" What's wrong with retyping? That's one of the things I loved about editing the magazine those years ago. I made up the dummy. I had to type everybody's poem that was going to be in that issue. Gosh, it's a wonderful way to lose yourself in a poem! There you've got every word--even the *the* or the *a*, and whether or not you put the *the* or the *a* in is terribly important too. That's the fun of poetry. Every little part, every single word, makes a difference. It's a condensed thing. Maybe that's what I love about it.

LMM: Does your poetry fit into any category or is there any label you would use to classify your poetry?

JBB: I sure wouldn't call myself a nature poet--I'm not good enough to do what people have to do, and yet I've written a lot of poems that include nature. One was about nothing but a magnolia tree. I write more about people and their feelings, but I don't think there's any category.

Symbolism is also important in writers. You can always isolate a few things with any one writer or poet. I think hands turn up often in my poetry. And I have people say I have a lot of religious references and that always amazes me because they're entirely unconscious. I'm not a church sort of person at all. It comes out that way.

LMM: Do you think your poetry has changed over the years?

JBB: Oh, yes, I do. For one thing the cynicism is all gone. And I perhaps write longer poems, occasionally, though I love short poems. If I can get an emotion or atmosphere or idea over in a few lines, that's the best way to do it. There are certain poems that take more than that, like the one about the barn. I really had to describe that it was falling down. And then I've written several long poems about the old home I live in now in Elkton, Kentucky, since my life changed and Garnett died a few years later I remarried and moved to western Kentucky, which is an entirely different part of Kentucky from any I've known. I must say that living down there was more of a change in poetry than any other. As far as I'm concerned, that part of Kentucky is a pocket of the Old South about two hundred years ago. The feeling of it. We talked about the fog that clings to the ground in the morning, the "witch's breath." It's really a very odd and special part of Kentucky and the country.

And living in a two-hundred-year-old house has influenced me. When I was growing up in Evanston, I thought the Chicago water tower was the oldest thing in the whole world because it had survived Mrs. O'Leary's fire. It's still there, a darling little water tower in the city. Now if I'm in the kitchen--I say *if* I'm in the kitchen; I try not to be there too often--in the old house, I realize over and over again that that kitchen is older than the Chicago water tower. That has to affect me some way. I'm more in touch with old things now, including myself, which makes a difference too.

LMM: Did your friendship with Robert Penn Warren affect your poetry?

JBB: No, I don't think it affected my poetry. He's one of the great poets of the world, one of the great men of letters. There he was, born in Todd County, the same county in which I'm living now. So it has certainly affected my life, particularly by the Robert Penn Warren Center being founded at Western Kentucky University on the Bowling Green campus.

Since Warren's death, his family absolutely overwhelmed us by giving us--without even mentioning it--Robert Penn Warren's entire personal working library: over 2400 books in which he's underlined, made notes, or they'd been given to him by famous writers and therefore been inscribed. They gave us his desk, his chair, several pieces of other furnishings from his study. He was, of course, the first poet laureate of the United States, and they gave us his laureate wreath, which I'm sure if I'd been his daughter I couldn't have given up. It's beautiful. They gave us his medal of freedom.

And they still send books. The other day his daughter, Rosanna, a beautiful poet in her own right who teaches at Boston University, sent Warren's English translation of the French writer Flaubert. "They keep turning up," she said. All the markings are in it from when Robert Penn Warren was working on his poem.

Everybody who lives in Kentucky should go and see that marvelous collection, but I also realize unfortunately there are some people in Kentucky who don't even know about Robert Penn Warren. He's really better known in some foreign countries. But I suppose that's always true. Robert Penn Warren's novel *All the King's Men* is required reading in the high schools and colleges of Russia. *All the King's Men* has been translated into Russian, and the Russian translator came to the Warren Center and spoke several years ago.

The Robert Penn Warren Center has influenced my life. It has been a lot of work to keep working with others on it. It is exciting to touch books that some great writer has used and made his notations in.

LMM: What is your opinion of current poetry in the United States?

JBB: Ooooh! Depends on where you look at it. Some fine poetry is being written, but I see a lot of poems in *The New Yorker* magazine--there aren't many that still print poetry, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*--which are too obtuse. It's as if they threw words in a hat and scrambled them out and put them together. Yet every now and then I run across a poem that's just wonderful. Maybe I'm a little behind the times now.

We're not seeing enough poetry to create many new admirers of poetry, except in spoken poetry. There's a whole new movement now of what I call (and maybe others do too) "platform poetry"--poetry readings. Now they're attended mostly by other poets, but not always. They get to be very popular in coffeehouses. Of course, the YMCA in New York City has also had wonderful poetry readings.

And I learned a long time ago that there can be a difference too in platform poetry and poetry you read. A person reading a poem can give you a really good feeling about it, and then when you read it at home, it's not that good.

The really good poetry is wonderful when it's read out loud and when it's read quietly.

I know Wade Hall who is well known in Kentucky and took over the editorship of the poetry magazine when I moved to western Kentucky. He used to be one of our editors--we had an editorial board of four or five people. If Wade particularly liked a poem and the rest of us weren't that enthusiastic, he'd say, "May I please read it?" Well, by the time he's read it, he'd sold us. Or if someone else had a poem that Wade didn't think was good enough to go in the magazine, Wade would ask to read it, and he could ruin it.

I'm lucky to have a son (Shelby) who reads poetry beautifully. I'm never fearful when he does it. People can ruin a poem by reading it. But the really good poem is good either way.

LMM: Shelby, what was it like growing up as the oldest son of the poet Joy Bale Boone?

SB: It really didn't make any difference in our lives. We had marvelous childhoods. If she was writing poetry then, she did it when we were asleep.

I guess when I went away to college was the first time we really began to share her poetry. She'd send a copy of what she'd written and continued doing that until I moved--well, you still do once in a while. I would write my reaction and ask questions about certain things. That's the way we really began sharing poetry.

JBB: Shelby became so interested in English literature. He was teaching me things too. He's the one who told me I'd like Albert Camus, the great French writer. So I started reading Albert Camus who turned out to be one of my most favorite writers of all times. So Shelby and I started sharing more literature.

Shelby is one of the best people for exegesis I've ever known--he can take a poem and see what's in it from the writer and even surprise the writer by seeing things of which he or she was unaware. So we got very close. We were always close as people. He was my mainstay during World War II because he had so many younger siblings and Garnett was overseas.

SB: As a child I probably wasn't even aware that you wrote poetry. But it certainly has been a big part of our relationship since I was eighteen.

LMM: Shelby, do you have any favorites?

SB: "The Supper" always comes to mind immediately. I love "Letters from Lyme Regis" and "Letters from Abroad." And each one I read is a favorite. I get new things each time I read it or reacquainted with old feelings.

JBB: Shelby became an editor, so I've had great help from him.

LMM: Do you have any advice for a young poet?

JBB: For one thing, never try to force a poem. And always let it be completely honest. Don't go in for contrivances that will make a line fit better. Be really sold on what you're saying, or don't bother saying it. I think freshness and honesty in poetry are terrifically important. I don't think it's something to play with, because words are so terribly important. A poem I love, or a certain line, you might not like, but if one of us loves it, then it's a good poem for that person.

When we had the magazine, one of our subscribers said very nicely he'd like to put up an annual award for the best poem. We certainly wanted it, but we editors did not want to decide what was the best poem. The best for you might not be the best for me. Who could say? We all have our own emotions and experiences. So we told him we'd love to do it, but we'd like our readers to decide the poem that had meant the most to them. We put a ballot in the last of the four issues of each year, and our readers chose the poem that meant the most to them. The poem that meant the most to the most people was the one. And usually the poem that got the greatest number of votes had been felt to be one of the move "moving" ones--I'm avoiding the word best--by the editors.

LMM: Is there anything else you have to say about poetry?

JBB: Personally, poetry has been such a comfort, as well as an excitement, in my life. Writing poetry is a great thing I think because it's dealing with your own emotions and responses to things. Now there's a word I don't like to use with poetry, but to be honest I must use it, and that is *therapy*. If you have a disturbing emotion or an extra happy one or you see something that's enormously beautiful, to be able to express it is wonderful--it's therapy. And the poems you write if you're upset, you can tear up if you get too vehement.

And then you can write poetry whenever you are. You can write it in your head. Many poems have started as I'm driving somewhere--Louisville, Lexington--and enough will stay with me until I get to paper and pencil. Of course many people have said, "Why don't you put a recorder on the seat beside you?" That's getting too mechanical. It's not too bad if I lose a poem every now and then. There are millions in the world that will never be read. I can't think, "Gee, I've lost a poem!" It would only be a loss to me. And if it were something I needed to work out, it would come out.

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