

Ashley Jones Transcript

I do think poets are charged to document their time. We're the mirror of society. When we look back in history and we look at the poems, often we're looking to see what the society was like, what happened, who were the heroes, and so we can do that right now. All of us can listen to these pieces of history and document them in our poems.

Did you ever want to write a poem, but not sure you could do it...

but thought you might want to try?

I'm Trinity Ross,

And I'm Nathaniel Hudson. And we're here today to help launch our first lesson about how to write a poem.

You probably write poems or make up poems in your head every day and just don't know it.

There was a girl who grew up in Alabama thinking she might want to write poems.

And that same girl is now Poet Laureate of Alabama.

And her name is...

My name is Ashley M. Jones, and I'm the Poet Laureate of Alabama and a teacher at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. So, the Alabama School of Fine Arts, also known as ASFA, is a public school which has six departments. Students can apply to study creative writing, dance, music, visual arts, theater and math and science.

And it goes from 7th through 12th grade. So, it's a really fantastic school. I actually went to school here myself. So, it's kind of cool to be literally in a classroom that I learned in as a young person. And growing up here was really exciting because I had wonderful parents, and my home life was always full of art and discovery, and I also read and drew pictures and sang songs.

It just was a wonderful childhood for me. And, you know, growing up, going to school, I enjoyed school a lot, but when I learned about the history of Birmingham, like most people who are from the South, that's when I started to think this place is

not for me. I'm not like those people who did those horrible things to Black people during the Civil Rights Movement.

So, it actually wasn't until I left Alabama that I started to understand that I actually loved Alabama. I went to graduate school in Miami, which is a totally different planet from anywhere in the United States I think, because the scenery, the culture, it was all so different, which was great for, you know, exploring and developing my writing skills. But personally, I really missed those Southern things that I was used to. So, through that experience, I started to actually write my way back home.

My first book, *Magic City Gospel*, is about Birmingham. It's about the Civil Rights Movement. It's about my own upbringing here. And writing that book while I was away really helped me understand that I do love this place that I call home, and that it's much more than I thought it was when I lived here before, and also that everywhere else in the U.S. is dealing with the same problems. There is no promised land in the USA that has no issues of discrimination. So yeah, I love it here now.

I had already been reading and writing as a young person. That was the thing I loved to do, and I also loved writing, but first it was stories. When I was, you know, five, six years old, I would write little mystery stories and I thought that's what I would be when I grew up, a mystery novelist. But in the second grade, something incredible happened. I had an assignment from a teacher to memorize something that I had been reading and come to class and recite that something.

So, I just so happened to have been reading this book called *Honey I Love and Other Love Poems* by Eloise Greenfield. She was a children's author, really incredible woman. And in this book there are all kinds of poems about Black children and Black culture, Black history. And this was a really crucial time in my life because I was already starting, as I said, to learn about history and what happened in the South specifically.

And it made me uneasy to learn what happened to Black people. And it got to a point where I was afraid to even read about Black history because I just didn't want to know what was done to my people. It's very painful to learn that as a Black person, but reading this book gave me a different perspective. It showed me that I could still be joyful and acknowledge the history and educate people about that history so that it wouldn't happen again.

So, the poem that I chose to memorize is called Harriet Tubman. She's a really important figure in my life for many reasons. Of course, for what she did for America, but because of this experience, I memorized that poem. I felt so excited and so proud of that history. And so, I remember getting in front of the class and at that time I was very shy. I'm not as shy anymore, but back then I hated speaking in front of the class.

So, I got in front of the class and I remember reciting

"Harriet Tubman didn't take no stuff,
wasn't scared of nothing neither,
didn't come in this world to be no slave,
and wasn't gonna stay one either,"

and the poem goes on a little bit. But I remember that moment saying those words dressed up as Harriet Tubman, I felt so just powerful. I didn't feel insecure or sad or scared.

I was just proud, and I felt that my voice really did matter in the world. So, I knew that day that I had to keep close to that thing which gave me that feeling, which was poetry. So, from that day on, I've been writing poetry.

When I was seven, I had this notebook and I had previously been using it for a spy journal. I really loved the book, *Harriet The Spy*, so I would spy on my family all the time, which is very strange, but I'm a strange person. To be an artist, you kind of have to be. But since that day, you know, I was writing for myself mostly when I got into sixth grade is when a teacher noticed that I had some talent, and she recommended that I apply to the School of Fine Arts, which I was cool with because my sister already went here for visual arts, so I knew about the school and I thought, "sure, I'd love to apply."

So, I applied, got in, and from that point, when I entered ASFA, I started to learn more about the tools that I would need to write better, I guess. I started to learn the formal ways of writing. I read a lot of poets. I learned the history of poetry. I learned how to take and give criticism and all of those things were great. I was one of a few Black students in my classes, so I often felt alone and like, you know, my perspective just wasn't heard, which is no fault of the students, of course, we were all teenagers, you know, and being a teenager in a formal writing environment too, it's a lot of stress.

So, I really had to learn how to cope with that and how to protect my creative impulse in a very fast paced workshop environment. I've met so many poets across the country and here in Alabama who don't have that education, but have the same passion for writing, and have the same tools. There are many, many tools like this video we're shooting right now. There's many tools that you can use to learn how to write.

So, the tools of writing I think that are universal, that you don't have to learn in a school is really understanding the human condition. That is the key to all poetry writing. And all of us are actively involved in the human condition because we are humans. We are alive, we are living. We have experiences. And so that's what I see in all poets. Not just academic, not just non-academic. Everybody is trying to document their life or something they've seen or some experience that matters to them. So that's something that I think anybody can latch onto.

I think there's a lot of places that you can find a poem, and I guess I mean that in two ways. Find a literal poem that you can model or be inspired by or find the inspiration for a poem. There are so many resources, including The Story Acorn, which has a lot of amazing stories of people who are involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

We know we can be moved and inspired by the stories of others.

We thought we'd ask Ashley if she ever used problems from her own life to find a poem.

So, when I was younger, and even now, a lot of my poems came out of my own personal experiences, things that I'm really trying to figure out or problems that I'm trying to solve within myself.

So, for example, when I was very young, I wrote a lot about Black history, interestingly enough. So, I was trying to figure out, how can people be so mean to others? How do we stop this situation, and now those problems, you know, are different. You know, I'm older. So maybe I'm looking more specifically at how can we create equity in housing? How can I heal from something that someone has said or done to me? And everybody has those issues. Even if it's something like I had a fight with my friend. What do I do about that? That is also material for a poem. You can figure that out. Document that. Put your thoughts and emotions down about anything small, big, it doesn't matter.

Ashley talks about how stories of the Civil Rights Movement affected her.

We asked her to tell us one of those stories.

So, one story that still really impacts me is the story of the four little girls and the 16th Street Baptist Church. I learned about that when I was very, very young and I actually, you know, attended school here at ASFA, which is just a few blocks away from Kelly Ingram Park and the 16th Street Baptist Church.

And so, in my adult life, I visited the church. I stood, you know, in the spot where the bomb exploded, and it occurred to me that it could have been me if I had been born at that time. And that really, it means a lot, you know, you can feel it in your body. I firmly believe that history is not something that's just to throw away in the past. It's a part of our present and a part of our future. We have to look back at that and understand that we have a place there, here, and in the future.

And so that story has always sort of, not haunted exactly, but it's always just been in my mind and heart, because those girls were just simply going to church, going to the bathroom, you know, powdering their noses, and they were met with death because of somebody else's hate. And to be so physically close to that space, you can feel the ghosts of that, you know, here in downtown Birmingham. And so that's something that I've written about, and I just think about a lot even as we look at some of the modern examples of those same sorts of tragedies where it's still, it still could be me today.

And that's not lost on me ever.

We know Ashley was inspired by Harriet Tubman.

We wondered if some of those in the Bloody Tuesday episodes, here on The Story Acorn, might also be "Harriet Tubmans..."

and if they might be good sources for poems.

We absolutely can write poems about those freedom fighters, civil rights heroes. People like Harriet Tubman certainly are worth poetry, whether you're exploring what happened historically or reacting, talking about your own connection to those things, but there's so many people we could mention who did so much during the sixties and beyond. I do think poets are charged to document their time. We are the mirror of society.

When we look back in history and we look at the poems, often we're looking to see what the society was like, what happened, who were the heroes, and so we can do

that right now. All of us can listen to these pieces of history and document them in our poems.

So, a lot of writing poetry is about asking questions, asking yourself questions, or asking the world questions. So, the poems that you write, even if you're starting from source material, like the Story Acorn, it doesn't necessarily have to end up being exactly the story that you heard. So if, for example, you listen to Olivia White and you learn about how they had to hide in a cornfield, maybe your poem is about courage and bravery, or even the role of fear in your life and how fear is still there even when you're fighting for freedom.

You don't have to retell the story necessarily. You just have to react and use your own experiences, your own feelings as you write your poem.

**So, we've talked about the importance of these poems
and these stories,**

but now we want to write one. So, what do we do?

And so maybe what you can do is listen to a story from the Story Acorn. And for this first attempt, just react. Get a piece of paper out or your computer, whatever you use to write and write down a sentence.

This is how I feel.

Write another sentence.

This is what I want to do.

Write another sentence.

This is how I hope things will be in the future.

And those three sentences are a poem.

Even though you might not think they are, they absolutely are. You can keep adding to that list. Just keep reacting. Think about your own life. Is there a time that you felt afraid or is there a time that you felt like you wanted to change the world? How do you imagine that the world could be changed? Write those things down. Just simple sentences and put 'em in a list. Turn it in, send it in, and I'll see you the next time. We'll talk more later, but that's your first step.

So, all I'm asking you to do is write one true sentence and then another true sentence and another, and before you know it, you have a poem. That's all we're doing as poets is writing the truth.

So, for the students out there, once you've written your series of truths, send that in to The Story Acorn, and we'll go from there. There will be opportunities for us to connect so we can help you along your poet's journey.

For the teachers out there, I know it might be a little scary to try to teach a new subject or to try to teach poetry in general, but we are here for you at ASFA. We are absolutely here to help and to support you on your journey as well to teach and hopefully also to write some poetry with your students. And certainly, we understand that you have things to do. You have a curriculum to follow, but those students who are interested maybe can go to the library or to some quiet space, tune in to some lessons that we'll share with them.

And also remember that teaching poetry does fit into many of your curricular goals. So, teaching poetry and stories does fit into the curriculum. They do teach writing, community building, and character building for your students. So, it'll fit right into what you're already doing, and again, we're here to support you along that journey.

The purpose of this video is to introduce us to Ashley and to get her initial thoughts on how we, if we want to, can write a poem...

but this is not Ashley's last lesson here on The Story Acorn.

The Alabama School of Fine Arts is teaming up with The Story Acorn to make it possible for Ashley to meet with us throughout the year.

So, we're working on a system where we'll have classes that students can tune into over Zoom to develop their poetry writing, story writing skills, and it doesn't have to be the whole class. It can be just a few interested students, whoever has that spark of interest for writing and telling stories. Just like everybody in school doesn't play football or basketball or swimming or whatever sports you have, not everybody's going to want to be a poet and that's okay, but whoever wants to be one, we have resources for them.

So, to anybody out there watching this, I want you to know that you can do this. You can write a poem, you can write those simple, true sentences, and you can share your feelings on the page. Don't worry about what anybody else thinks.

There are no mistakes in art. As long as you're being your authentic self, as long as you're bringing your truth to the page, you're golden.

**So, there you have it, our first lesson with Ashley,
and now we have our first assignment.**

Get a piece of paper out or your computer, whatever you use to write and write down a sentence. This is how I feel. Write another sentence. This is what I want to do. Write another sentence. This is how I hope things will be in the future. And those three sentences are a poem. Even though you might not think they are, they absolutely are.

So, when I was young, something spoke to me and told me that I could be a poet. And I think that same thing is speaking to some of you right now. So, when you hear it, write something down and I'll meet you down the road.

**And then send that poem to us at TheStoryAcorn.Submissions@gmail.com.
We'll send it to Ashley, and then just as Ashley says, we'll see you down the road at the Story Acorn, where it's Friday Night Lights for our future artists, writers, poets, and historians.**