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INTERVIEW:

**Interview with Susan Rich: Being Pleased with Your Manuscript**

**TSP:** Susan, your new book *Gallery of Postcards and Maps: New and Selected Poems* is coming out with Salmon Poetry this month! It is an incredible accomplishment to publish a book, but a “new and selected” shows us a poet’s life through their art. How have you grown as a poet through the years and what about you has stayed the same?

**SR:** Wow. This is a great, as well as an impossible question. *Great,* because it is so relevant to this moment but impossible for a poet (this poet) to see her work that clearly. Creating a "new and selected" required me to study my four poetry collections, published from 2000 to 2014. Usually, I am not one to go back over my work after a  book comes into the world so this was a surprising read. Who is this poet called Susan Rich? She seems to have a dark sense of humor and an interest in surreal women painters and photographers.

Right from my first book, I developed a compulsion to look outside the self: at maps, wars, and people who live in faraway places. This is, in part, because I was employed in the field of international human rights. For most of my twenties, I lived/worked outside the United States in Bosnia Herzegovina, the Republic of Niger, Palestine, and South Africa. My geography continually altered. It wasn't until I had returned to Massachusetts, where I am from, and finished graduate school (a Masters in International Education and Development) that I started writing poetry with any regularity.

Does this matter? Well, for one thing, I continually felt thrown off balance by a new country, a new context, and often a new continent. New to me, but simply home to all the people who lived there. Even now, when I've been settled in Seattle, Washington for over twenty years, writing about other worlds is a constant. There's new poems which respond to the places I've traveled in recent years: Ireland and Morocco but more common are poems of  the lives of surreal women artists such as Leonora Carrington, Hannah Maynard, and Remedios Varo. These past two years, I've enjoyed time traveling through the lives and works of these extraordinary women artists and visiting other dimensions.

Perhaps what's new in my work is a willingness to lean into vulnerability. If we're lucky, this comes with age: to write and to feel less self-conscious. To grow kinder and stronger at once.

The new work includes the poem, "Someday I Will Love Susan Rich." Even sharing this title with you feels uncomfortable. I wrote this poem in the lineage of Frank O'Hara, Roger Reeves, and Ocean Vuong. Notice there are no women poets here and this is what propelled me forward beyond the discomfort of including one's own name in a title. The first line: "Often a woman struggles to mention herself" struck me as true for nearly every woman I know. How can this still be true in 2022, yet it is. Recently, I saw a bumper sticker that said something to the effect: lead with compassion but take no bullshit. Perhaps that's my new manifesto for poetry. I feel that sensibility when I read the work of the Polish poet, Wisława Szymborska.Symborska had a great sense of humor, married only briefly, and at the time of her death, was busy working on a new collection of poems; she was 88. I think Szymborska is my new role model; during her life, along with writing poems, she also worked as a railroad worker, an illustrator, a translator, and a journalist.

So to answer your question: In my poems, I still work to balance the inner and outer worlds I inhabit; perhaps now, I can finally write more boldly, without apology.

**TSP:**  You and Kelli Russell Agodon have been working on a book, *Demystifying the Manuscript*, which looks deeply into something many poets wonder about and work hard at—the art of putting together a poetry manuscript. What some of the best advice you have for poets who are working on putting together their own manuscript?

**SR:** Well, my best advice is that our forthcoming anthology, *Demystifying the Manuscript*, will be the essential book for a new (or experienced) poet to find everything they need to know about putting their poetry collection together. It contains superb advice from over 40 contemporary poets including Linda Pastan, January Gill O'Neal, Spencer Reese, Diane Seuss, and many others.  But to answer your question another way, the best advice I can offer is that in the end, your name will be on the cover and you're the one that needs to be completely pleased.

This doesn't mean that you can't take advice from others who might have more expertise and a bit more distance from the subject matter than you do. Don't let your ego lead. Like a long relationship, this book will be with you forever, and if you're lucky, may even outlive you. So take-in all the advice you can garner from poet friends, trusted teachers,  and perhaps even a professional "book doctor"  (many poets hire outside editors before sending their book out to a press) but in the end, be sure you've done the absolute best work you can. For many of us, this means: do not rush towards publication. My book, *Gallery of Postcards and Maps: New and Selected Poems*, has been a long time in the making and I believe it is a better book for the extra time taken to revise, and then revise again and again. Try to learn patience, the book industry is not going away anytime soon. Take in a deep breath and enjoy this fact: you are a writer in the world, working on your first, or third, or eleventh book. Congratulations for coming this far.

Best link to purchase Susan Rich’s books:

[Elliott Bay Books](https://www.cloudhq-mkt4.net/mail_track/link/a9affc1d2c92c88fb2_1669572291679?uid=69881&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.elliottbaybook.com%2Fgallery-postcards-and-maps-new-and-selected-poems)