

GUEST: W.S. MERWIN

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All day, the stars watch from long ago. My mother said, I am going now. When you are alone, you will be all right. Whether or not you know, you will know. Look at the old house in the dawn rain; all the flowers are forms of water. The sun reminds them through a white cloud, touches the patchwork spread on the hill, the washed colors of the afterlife that lived there long before you were born. See how they wake without a question, even though the whole world is burning.

That's one of Maui's most honored residents reading his work...he's a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner, W.S. Merwin. Yes, a major American writer whose poems, prose and translations have brought him international literary standing...he has lived in Ha'iku, Maui since the late 1970s. W.S. Merwin, or William as his friends call him, next on Long Story Short.

***Aloha mai kakou*, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to Long Story Short. From childhood, W.S. Merwin has loved the sound of words and putting them together. He's won nearly every major award for poetry in his five decades as a writer. Born in New York City, raised in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, Merwin traveled widely before coming to Maui in the late 70s to study Zen Buddhism. He built a house on old pineapple plantation land in Ha'iku, Maui, and found himself drawn to native Hawaiians, their culture and their causes. Words remain a constant in his life. In April 2009, he won his second Pulitzer prize for poetry, for his 21st book, *The Shadow of Sirius*.**

Well, let me ask you...kind of daunted to be talking to a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner. Any advice—

Forget about it.

—for me?

[chuckle]

What annoys you when people...in terms of how people react to you as a poet and as a Pulitzer winner?

Well, I don't think of myself that way at all, obviously. I mean, pretty silly, wouldn't it, if I walked around thinking, I'm this, and I'm that. All my life, I've wanted to write poetry since I was five years old. I've always thought when I finished—when I got a poem to where I was ready to let it go, 'cause I couldn't do any more to it, or for it, I thought, Well, I may never do that again, it may

never happen again. 'Cause I don't think, for me, that it's an act of will or an act of reason, or any of those things. Suddenly, I think to me, it's something that you hear. I mean, suddenly, there's a phrase or there's a moment in your life, or something which brings up, some words, something that have to do with that. And they're maybe words you've known all your life, but you never paid any attention to them. But all of a sudden, there they are, they're alive and they're going somewhere, and you listen to them. And I think that the whole secret of poetry is listening. And children know how to do this. Children start listening. Even before they know what words are, they're listening, they're paying attention. And then they learn to read, and in our culture, they're discouraged from reciting poetry or from the pleasures of poetry, which they know all about when they're very small. And if they're lucky, they catch up with it again, and they realize that it's a matter of not of just understanding, it's a matter of hearing something, and it's a matter of pleasure. It should be pleasure. And just as people say, Oh, I can't do that. Well, you don't think about a rock lyric, you don't think about whether you understand it. If you like it, you remember it, and you find that you're humming it in your head, after a while. And you haven't thought about whether you understand it, or maybe you don't understand it. I mean, back in the days long ago, when we all listened to Bob Dylan...I mean, the great lyrics of Bob Dylan and the Beatles I don't think anybody was supposed to understand then.

Somehow, it resonated.

What about the Yellow Submarine? I mean, what is understandable—

Or—

—about a yellow submarine?

Or who was the Egg Man?

Yeah. Yeah.

You know, I'm thinking of my daughter who wants to be an artist, and I think from the very beginning, I said, Well, make sure you can earn a living at it. Did you ever say, I want to be a poet, and a parent or someone else said to you, Whoa—

Oh, they all said that.

—be practical.

They all said that. And they said, What are you going to do to earn a living? And I said, Well, I'll find out that as I go along. But I didn't do it the other way around. I think I'm going to have a career, and then I'm going to write a little poetry in my spare time. I never ever thought of it that way. I thought, this is what I want to do with my life, and maybe I'll find some way to stay alive. And I lived on very little money for quite a few years. A lot of artists, in all the arts were that way until very recently. And it's only in recent generations that people thought that the first thing was earning a living. And as long as you think that, I mean, as long as you think that, you're not gonna do it. A friend of mine said, Well, I really want to try to translate Hawaiian poetry and I'm gonna do it when I get a grant uh, to do it. And I said, You're not gonna do it. You don't care

enough about it. He said, What do you mean? I said, You like surfing. And I said, If you want to go to surf in Australia or Bali, you find a way to get to Bali and Australia, and you go surfing. You don't worry about somebody giving you a grant to go surfing in Bali and Australia. You get on with it. If you want to start translating Hawaiian poetry, which I think is pretty well impossible, you try. You get to work, and you devote a lot of time to it, and you don't wait for somebody to subsidize you. [chuckle]

Why do you think it's impossible to translate Hawaiian poetry?

Because in the first place, the melodic—the lyric aspect of the great chants is... *hano hano hanalei I ka ua nui*. I mean, how do you ever translate a line like that? It's so magnificent. But you can't—there's nothing—no way in English that you convey that sound. And then underneath; so much of Hawaiian poetry is the overtone, all of the things that it's referring to, all of the myths that it's referring to. I mean, if you look at a book of translations, classical translations of Hawaiian poetry, about three-quarters of the page is footnotes, to say what all this really means. I mean, the rain always has an erotic meaning to it, and it has a reference to the place. And that place in other legends. And if you don't know those things, you don't really know what the *oli* is about.

You wrote an entire epic narrative of Hawaii, your—

Yeah.

—adopted home.

That's right. You know the story of Koolau and Piilani. Koolau was famous as a young man. He was the best shot on the island. And they said he never missed. He had one rifle that he was very proud of. And his wife—everybody believed that—you can't tell from the photographs, but she was considered very beautiful as a young woman. And they were in love, and they were married, and had a little boy, Mana, out on the western corner of—

Kauai.

Kauai. Koolau was fingered with leprosy, and it was at a time when they wouldn't let people with leprosy—they would ship them off to Kalaupapa to the leprosy colony over there. And they wouldn't let anybody from their family go with them, or even accompany them over there. And they never came back. And so the Hawaiians' name for leprosy was the separating sickness, because it broke up the family. And of course, for Hawaiians, nothing could be worse than that, because the family unit is integral. Koolau and Piilani, they suspected that their little boy probably had it too. And he did. And they decided that they would not allow him to be arrested, and they were going to stay together. And they went over to Kalalau to the valley on the north coast, where there were already a number of Hansen's Disease patients staying, to stay out of reach of the law. I mean, this was a very wild place, Kalalau, and then was one sheriff that wanted to capture him and make his political name doing that. And Koolau let it be known that they would not leave the valley alive. And that meant, obviously, that anybody who came for them was risking his life too. And the sheriff tried to get the jump on him, and Koolau killed him. And then, of

course, they sent the army in after him, and they escaped and I was absolutely fascinated the story, and I suddenly realized that if someone were to want to write about this—I couldn't write the history, I'm not a historian. I can't write an essay about it, that's ridiculous. And so I just sort of carried it around, that story. And I finally thought, the only way it'll work is as a poem. And the only way it'll work as a poem is if the central figure is not even Koolau, it's Piilani. It's a Hawaiian woman. And I said, I can't write a whole poem in the voice of a Hawaiian woman. Once I got started, this one night, I just saw her starting out at night, going up the trail,

You saw her in your mind? It was a visual—

Yeah, yeah. And I started the poem, about her just going up this trail. And the whole of her journey up, who she met, the places she went, and so forth, until she went down and the whole story. And then from there to the whole history of Kauai, because you can't separate them totally, it's all the same story. That was the poem.

It was a novel-in-verse called “The Folding Cliffs.” He was born William Stanley Merwin and from an early age he had a fascination with the magic of words. In his home on Maui, he writes only in longhand—daily—in a room with a view of the outdoors. Nature is an inspiration.

Can you tell me where you were, and what you were doing when you heard your first poetry inside?

Well, you know, I was very lucky. This is another thing that a lot of children don't have. Maybe they never did, I don't know. But my mother read poems to my sister and me; everything from silly childhood jingle poems to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses*. Stevenson spent several years here in Hawaii on the way to the South Pacific.

Yes.

And I can remember her reading Tennyson's *The Brook*, and I love that poem.

You loved it as a kid too?

Yeah, even when I was a little boy, before I could even read. I think some children are lucky and their parents read stories to them. And that's great. But prose and poetry are different, and hearing their parents read poetry is, I think very important. My father was a minister, and the sermons, I didn't pay any attention to. But we had to go to church every Sunday, and sometimes more often.

He was a Presbyterian minister, wasn't he?

Presbyterian minister; very strict Scotch Presbyterian. But he read the King James version of the Bible, the psalms and lots of the Old and New Testament, and that in the King James version. And that was the version that really seemed like magic to me, and I really listened to that language, and I know I knew quite a lot of those passages by heart by the time when I grew up and moved away from the whole thing. But I still remember that sound of hearing, hearing the

psalms and hearing the proverbs, and hearing the prophets and hearing the New Testament. That's very valuable for children to hear that.

So when you're writing, do you come at it from a place of joy?

Yeah, I really love everything to do with poetry. And I feel very lucky if something ever begins to sort of happen. I think there was a great French novelist, Flaubert, who somebody asked him about inspiration. He said, Inspiration consists in sitting down at the same table, at the same time, every day. And waiting—waiting—wandering around hoping to be struck by lightning, I mean, that doesn't make much sense. I mean, Keats, the sort of archetypal romantic of English poetry, very great poet, worked at it all the time. He tried very hard to write all the time.

And yet, you say when it happens, it's an accident.

Sure. It is; both of these things are true. When you look at dance, I mean, take ballet dance, for example.

M-hm.

It looks effortless, doesn't it?

It does. That's the point, isn't it?

And it's certainly not effortless. I mean, the effort that went into being able to do that. When you hear someone play Mozart, or any instrument, or whatever kind of music you like, a saxophone playing jazz and improvising; it looks effortless, doesn't it? It looks as though it happens—

Yes.

—all by itself. And you know perfectly well it didn't happen all by itself. This is a whole lifetime that's gone into that. And I think that's true of any of the arts. The arts have to be sort of partly an obsession. You have to be a little—

Partly an obsession.

—a little bit obsessed to make it work. Look at the great surfers. I mean, did they learn how to stand up on a surfboard with a with a big wave curling behind them all by themselves? It looks like the easiest thing in the world. At that point, it is the only possible thing to do. If you change your mind, you're—

[chuckle]

—you're wiped out right there.

And for years before, they've been on the alert for any bump in the surf, and they've been out there.

That's right.

After graduating from Princeton, W.S. Merwin began his literary career by translating in works in Spanish, French, Italian and Latin into English. He also worked as a private tutor to the son of famous author and poet Robert Graves. It was through Graves that Merwin met many other literary greats, such as T.S. Elliot. In 1952, when he was only 24 years old, he became a published author, with a book of verse titled *The Mask of Janus*. He lived in England, Spain, France, and New York, before settling in East Maui.

And what brought you there? You've lived in many parts of the world by then.

Yeah. I kept a little rent controlled apartment in New York for many years. I wanted to live there part of the year. I came out to Hawaii, and I really fell in love with Hawaii. And I met Robert Aitken, who was the Zen teacher here, and I wanted to stay and spend more time with him. Little by little, the longer I stayed here, the more I wanted to stay.

Was it just the nature that drew you?

It was partially the feeling of the remains of an ancient culture too, and of an ancient language and culture. And suddenly, here were the real remnants of it, I mean, with the hula and the chants, and the things like that, things that. Everything about it fascinated me. And they were still related to a place, and you could see the place that it was related to. I'm not a wannabe Hawaiian. I mean, that would be very silly. But I had I had, and still have, enormous respect for everything to do with Hawaiians.

You're a very successful poet. But what if you needed to pay the bills, you needed to publish poetry.

I would do something else. Then I would—

You couldn't force poetry?

No. I would take on a prose writing job, or go do some readings, or something like that to pay the bills. I've had to do that all my life. I never expected to earn a lot of money. I think that's been true of artists all through the years. I mean if money is the first thing, there are very few artists that, for whom money was the first thing. I think there are usually quicker and faster ways of earning money than writing a symphony or writing a few poems, or even writing a novel. I mean, sometimes you make it big with a novel, but sometimes most novelists have got five or six novels in the drawer that never even got published.

Do you always pay attention to how many books are selling, how you're doing in the—

No.

—marketplace?

No, when I get a royalty return or something like that, I look and see how they're doing, and then I put it in the file and forget about it. I think, sometimes I'm agreeably surprised, and books of poetry don't sell an awful lot.

You've won two Pulitzer Prizes for poetry thirty-eight years apart.

[chuckle]

And yet, you've written more than twenty collections, more than twenty books. What was it, do you think, that won you those two Pulitzers for those specific books?

I have no idea. I really don't. I don't know how people felt when they opened those books and read them, and what other books they were looking at that year that they were comparing them to, and all the deliberations that they went through. And what made them like that book more than another one. And a lot of it is not exactly politics, but it's chance. It depends on what book came up the last time, and so on, and so forth, and the shuffling of the cards. I mean,

part of it is chance in that sense. So I don't know. And I've never tried to double guess editors or if prizes come, I'm delighted, I'm always surprised. I'm very happy and it's very nice. But I certainly don't spend my life thinking, I wonder if I might get such-and-such a thing, or anything like that.

W.S. Merwin is also a pacifist, anti-imperialist, and an environmental activist. His poems are known for their awareness of the natural world, their intimate feelings for natural landscapes. But they're not always light and upbeat. Some of them are dark and foreboding.

You seem like such a pleasant, jovial, happy person for having an apocalyptic view of the world, as I read your poems.

I don't think these are incompatible. I'm on one level, extremely pessimistic. And you don't want me to pursue that line of thought either, I don't think.

You're pessimistic about what humans do to nature.

That's right.

I know that; that's very clear.

I don't think that we're separate from nature. I mean, this is one of the things in which I differ from Presbyterianism, and a whole lot of that tradition. I don't think that we're distinct from the rest of the life at all. And I think that if we damage the rest of life enough, we're damaging ourselves, and we'll pay for it.

You think we're continuing down that path.

Oh, I certainly do. I think that we can only think of it in terms of our own economic advantage, and this is deadly. The human population reached one billion in 1813. It's now somewhere around nine, and heading for eleven; and that's only in two hundred years. Now, what does that mean? That means you've got your foot on the accelerator as hard as you can, and you're heading straight for a stonewall. I mean, the first law of thermodynamics, I believe, says that you can't have an infinite amount of material in a finite space. Something's gonna happen, it's gonna explode. And I think that is why everything seems to be speeding up, and speeding up, and there's more and more conflict. I mean, look all around the world now, people are at war with each other. And I think that every effort in that direction is a hopeful sign. Every act of kindness simple goodwill toward any living thing is a good thing. I don't think there's ever enough of it. And I don't think we can ever learn too much about it. We never do quite enough of it. We all feel that, don't we? You know, that we're never quite nice enough to our parents, or to our friends, or we always forget all those things. I think that's all true. And it seems so simpleminded that it's hardly worth saying, but we obviously ought to think about more often.

Well, would you do us the favor and the pleasure of reading some of your poetry? Some—

Well—

Perhaps a couple of selections?

Sure. Well, the last book, I think it's probably—the last is the best place to choose them from. That's *The Shadow of Sirius*.

Pulitzer Prize winning book.

That's the one. Sirius is the dog star. And it's the brightest star in the visible sky, in visible humanity. And there are lots of stories about Sirius. But the middle poems of the middle section of the book is a series of little elegies, and they're all poems to do with dogs. Which is not very common. So let me read a poem. This was about a really great black dog, who was blind, and we used to walk every day together. And it's called, *By Dark*. When it is time, I follow the black dog into the darkness that is the mind of day. I can see nothing there but the black dog, the dog I know, going ahead of me, not looking back. Oh, it is the black dog I trust now in my time, after the years when I had all the truth, all the trust of the black dog through an age of brightness, and through shadow, on into the blindness of the black dog, where the rooms of the dark were already known and had no fear in them for the black dog leading me carefully up the blind stairs. She was a creature who was never afraid of anything. That was the wonderful thing about her; there was a real nobility to her.

W.S. Merwin and his wife Paula live surrounded by hundreds of species of palm trees that they planted and maintain. The poet rarely ventures far from his sanctuary on Maui. Mahalo to two-time Pulitzer Prize winner W.S. Merwin, and to you for joining me on Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

This a poem to my wife called, *To Paula in Late Spring*. Let me imagine that we will come again, when we want to, and it will be spring. We will be no older than we ever were. The warm grieves will have eased like the early cloud to which the morning slowly comes to itself, and the ancient defenses against the dead will be done with, left to the dead at last. The light will be as it is now in the garden that we have made here these years together, of our long evenings and astonishment.

Oh, that was wonderful.

Good. I'm—

That was wonderful.

—glad you liked that.