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This interview was conducted on October 10, 2017 with Marilyn Singer in New York City at the Third Street Music School Settlement. The interviewer is Nancy Johnson.

NJ: I am going to just let you get started. And here's a question to think about. It's an oral history, so could you tell us about your history. What brought you eventually to the place you are now as a poet, writer? And you can go back as far as you want.

MS: When I was a very little kid, I was not very good at going to sleep at night. In fact, I always wanted to stay up. Eventually I did have to go to bed, and I still couldn't sleep. So, my neighbor, a woman that I absolutely loved named

Mrs. Fell said to me, Why don't you make up some stories to tell yourself so that you could go to sleep. I thought this was a really interesting idea. My parents read to me a lot. They read to me during the day, they read to me at bedtime. I wasn't bereft of books. My father in particular always sang to me. He got these hit parade sheets. They were pastel colored. I remember them because I can see them in my head. They were apricot colored or very pale green. He would sing me the hit songs of the day, and that would also help. But I think when I got a little older, I don't know if he sang to me quite as much, but I remember that I was just having trouble sleeping. So, I started making up stuff in my head. I don't remember what I made up, but I know that I made up some stories.

When I got older still, and we're still talking a little kid, I would go into my parents' bathroom. By this time we had moved from the Bronx to Massapequa. They had a master bathroom, and we had another, a middle bathroom also. But I would go into their bathroom.

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I think I liked the color, it was blue. And I would make up stories about insects, talking insects. I would bring in a flashlight and flash it on the ceiling, and that was Lightey the Lightning Bug, and I would make up these stories. But I would say them out loud. I would say them out loud to myself. My parents thought I had imaginary friends. They didn't think there was anything weird about it because they knew about kids having imaginary friends. I knew they weren't imaginary friends. I knew that I was making up stories, and there was Lightey the Lightning Bug and all of Lightey's pals. So that sort of started the story path.

By the time I got to 3rd grade, I was not only making up these Lightey stories, but I had started to write poetry. Among the books that my parents read me were quite a few poetry books. They were Little Golden Books collections of poetry, but there was a lot of poetry. I just loved it.

I can't say exactly why I loved it. I think there is a relationship between that and the songs, because I loved songs. I sang from a very, very early age. My parents had these old tape recordings of me singing. I keep threatening to transfer them onto something. I don't even know if they're transferable at this point. But I would sing stuff like, "Give Me A Little Kiss," and "Baby Face," which I sang at my speech for NCTE. We could talk about that moment if you want to, but we don't have to.

NJ: Yes.

MS: I think hearing those lyrics really developed in me a taste for poetry and appreciation for rhythm and rhyme and lyrics and all that, and the fact that they were reading poetry to me. So, I really developed a taste for it. Then I just started writing it. I know that I started writing in about 3rd grade, because I actually have a poem that I wrote, which says, Marilyn Singer. It says the date, and the date oddly enough was my birthday, which is really strange, and I had just turned 8. So that started me on that road writing poetry.

I remember all of my early poetry rhymed, because that's what I thought poetry had to do, because lyrics rhyme. One teacher said to me, Why don't you try writing free verse. I said, Well, what is that? She said, Well, it's poetry that doesn't rhyme. So, I ended up writing a paragraph (laughter) about skating, ice skating, roller skating, something I didn't even do, which was funny. Then it took me a while to learn what free verse actually was, but it wasn't a paragraph.

But poetry really stuck. I just loved writing it. I ask myself a lot, Why? I mean, I know that the songs whetted my appetite for that. But there's a whole bunch of other factors, some of which I can probably mention and some of which I probably will never figure out. I think the

fact that I could say a lot in a very small space was important to me. I think the fact that poetry has an element of surprise. And it not only surprises other people, it constantly surprises me. Some of the imagery that pops into my head, I just go, Where did that come from? I think I like that. Some of my poetry was funny, so I liked the ability to be funny. And a lot of it as I got older asked questions that I then attempted to answer for myself, especially about, questions about nature and things like that. I think those are some of the things. But it really stuck. I continued to write it. And during show-n-tell, I'd be the one to get up there and read my poems. I don't think I was very popular with my classmates, but I was very popular with my teachers (laughter).

I continued to write it. I wrote it throughout junior high and high school and into college. I went to, my junior year abroad, I went to Reading University in England, and I got to write for the mag-- We had various magazines there. I had some really good friends who were actually good critics, who would read my stuff or I would read it to them, and they would give me suggestions. I don't think I got too many suggestions from the teachers, oddly enough. But I think -- I never took any formal class in poetry. I took one class in creative writing at Queens College, and the teacher said to me that I was not very good at prose, at least he said it in so many words. But he said my poetry had real promise, which was also interesting to me. So that probably inspired me to continue writing poetry. It took me a while to decide, No, my prose is good too. (Laughter)

NJ: You were an English major, correct?

MS: I was an English major.

NJ: And so -- one creative writing class. Was it leaning towards literature in your degree?

MS: Yes, I was planning to be a teacher. I had an education minor.

NJ: Okay.

MS: So, it was, whatever the spectrum was. I did take a number of honors classes, so those were more seminar-like.

NJ: Right.

MS: I took plays of the '30s, and I loved the teacher. He also taught a class in Shakespeare, and I think it was -- it wasn't tragedy, was it? Maybe it was. No, it wasn't. But I think it was plays

up to a certain point in Shakespeare's career. He was really good. I really liked him. But it was mostly, yes, it was mostly literature. I think I had to take a grammar (laughter) class.

NJ: Still.

MS: Grammar -- No, it was actually useful, I mean, to me. But we never parsed sentences though. I never learned to do that in my entire life. I still don't know how to do it. I've seen people, I've seen examples of it, and I go, they never taught us that. It was not part of the curriculum. And so yes, it was mostly literature and one creative writing class.

NJ: And you became a teacher.

MS: I did. But not for very long. (Laughter)

NJ: That's what I wondered. And did you teach poetry?

MS: I did. I taught a lot of poetry. I also used song lyrics, because it was the early '70s in New York City.

NJ: Oh.
(Laughter)

MS: I didn't get along very well with the administration. I think they thought I was too rebellious and flaky. I was somewhat political at that time. And to be honest, I don't know if I was a brilliant teacher at that time. I just started out. I think I tried it. I think I was an innovative person, and I think I tried a lot of things, some of which worked, and some of which didn't.

I know that -- at one point I spent an inordinate amount of time on the *Who's Tommy* (laughter), teaching this rock opera. (Laughter) I know, but it was too long, it's been too long, I don't know. But I had to teach *The Scarlet Letter* and things like that too, so it was a balance. That's what I did. I taught full time for three years, in high school, only high school. And then I taught as a sub for about a year. During that time that I was subbing, that's when I started to actually write children's books, much to my total surprise because I did not expect that that was what was going to happen. (Laughter)

NJ: Your first books were not poetry; is that correct?

MS: No, they weren't.

NJ: Did you go back to your insects?

MS: Yes, that actually was not my first. My first book was a picture book. It was *The Dog Who Insisted He Wasn't*, and it was a prose picture book. The second book was a novel, *No Applause, Please*. It was sort of based on my younger life, a friendship that I had. Then I wrote another picture book, *The Pickle Plan*. And then I wrote a book about having heart surgery, which I had when I was 8. The editor I had been working with turned it down. And I thought, Oh no, what am I going to do? But Liz Gordon at HarperCollins, it was Harper & Row at the time, took it, and I did a lot of books with her. I loved her. I thought she was a fantastic editor. None of them were poetry.

The first poetry book was *Turtle in July*, which came many years after that. Yes, and that was *Judy Whipple*. It was a different publisher, and I hadn't really -- Isn't that funny? So, that was the first one. There were quite a few books, I haven't counted, but there were quite a few books before that. That one was well received, so I continued to write poetry books which sold well, some of which didn't sell well. I did some with Judy and then other editors.

NJ: Do you remember what inspired that switch? I mean, *Turtle in July* is a collection. Had you been writing those and all of a sudden you --

MS: Well that's, that was kind of funny. That book started off as a prose picture book. It was about a grandmother and her grandson walking around a pond, looking at the animals, and they were talking about these different animals. And it just -- it didn't work, it wasn't good. And something in my head said, What if I wrote these as poems in the voices of animals? I had written poetry, I continued to write poetry as an adult, and it was actually adult poetry, and I got it in some magazines and stuff. But I wasn't really writing a lot of poetry when it came to me to do that, which is really funny. But it was obviously there or somewhere, you know, hiding somewhere inside.

NJ: Right.

MS: So that's what I did. I decided to write these poems in voices of animals and I think that surprised me too. As I said, it was well received, and then I continued -- then I remembered how much I love writing poetry. I think that's what happened. I wrote it and I just went, Oh man, this is really my favorite thing to write. It's not that I don't like writing prose, because I do, and both fiction and nonfiction, and sometimes everything's a respite from everything else.

I love writing poetry, but I just want to write something else right now. I love writing fiction, but I can't make up more stories from my head now, so let me do some nonfiction. So, it balances out. But it was just a surprise. It just -- it came about, and that started my writing a lot more books for children. I haven't written for adults (laughter) in ages. I have nothing to say to them anyway.

(Laughter)

NJ: Right. Have you taught poetry to children?

MS: You mean writing poetry?

NJ: Mm-hmm.

MS: I have not. I don't know if I feel a lot equipped to do that. I know that there are fabulous poets who do that. I think Joyce Sidman, who is one of my favorite poets, and a friend, I think she does that, and other people do it too. No, I've given tips to kids when I give talks on writing poetry. I've read kids poetry, and I've spoken -- I spoke to a poetry club and read some of my stuff. It's mostly been tips, but I haven't really come up with some kind of syllabus on how to write children's poetry. I leave that to the teachers. I don't really want to teach (laughter). It sounds terrible, because I really, really respect teachers, especially having been one, but I just don't want to do that at this point. I do like when I get a chance to talk to kids, answering their questions, because I think that's, to me, the most interesting thing.

NJ: What kind of questions do they ask?

MS: Well they ask a lot about the reverso poems these days, because most of the kids that I've been talking to, that's what they seem to be familiar with. They usually ask, Where did I come up with the ideas for them? And do I have a favorite poem? Sometimes they just say, How do you do it? And that's hard to answer, but they ask things like that. Sometimes they ask other questions, like who's my favorite author? I've been asked, How much money do you make? And my answer to that is, Not enough.

(Laughter)

NJ: Yes, poet.

MS: I'm a poet, you know. So yes, a lot of questions like that. The weirdest question I ever, ever got, which has nothing to do with poetry per se, but it was hilarious, was, If your husband cheated on you, would you write a book about it? And I said, I don't know. I don't think so. (Laughter)

MS: Isn't that funny? It was in a library in Queens, and the librarian came up to me afterwards and said, I think she watches a lot of soaps. Which I thought was very -- but I thought it was hilarious. I mean, it didn't bother me, that question. It was funny, you know. It sort of ranks along with, How much money do you make? (Laughter)

NJ: Well you probably won't get that one again.

MS: Uh, you never know. (Laughter)

NJ: Well that's true.

MS: Probably not.

NJ: Probably not. So let's go to -- you said they ask a lot about reverso poems, and *Mirror Mirror* was the first for me. It introduced me to reverso poems.

MS: Yes, it was the first one I wrote too.

NJ: So how did you know about that form, that poetry form? And talk through the history of this, and then where it's led to the other books.

MS: Well, I think I came up with the form. I can't swear to that. Somebody sent me something, I think it was done after mine, where somebody wrote a speech and then reversed it and the speech had another meaning. I don't remember who did it. But I never saw that before I wrote the poems. I think it came out actually afterwards, as well.

It started with this little tiny poem that's in the back of the book. I have this back matter in the book, this little thing, and I was sitting on the sofa, and I saw my cat, and what came into my head was, A cat without a chair, incomplete; Incomplete, a chair without a cat. A tiny little poem, and it amused me, and I started laughing. I thought it was really cool. But then, I wondered, well could I write more poems like it? I'm a person who likes -- I like to challenge myself, in terms of writing. Not in terms necessarily in other things (laughter). You're not going to catch me skydiving in the near future (laughter).

But in terms of writing, I really like doing that. I wondered, Well could I possibly write more poems like this? So, I wrote a whole bunch of them. They were not all based on fairy tales.

NJ: Okay.

MS: And I showed them to an editor, who was very smart, and she said to me -- I'm not going to mention who it is because she said, I can't do the book. (Laughter)

I don't remember why, but she said, Can't do the book, but I think you've really got something here, and I think you should base the whole collection on fairy tales since a number of the poems are based on fairy tales. I thought that was fantastic, and I decided I would see if I could do it. And that's exactly what happened. The whole collection became based on fairy tales. Fairy tales work well because --

Well, should I explain what a reverso is? Okay. A reverso is one poem with two halves. You read the first half down, the way you would any poem basically, except for a concrete poetry, and then you read the second half of the lines reversed with changes only in punctuation and capitalization. And here's the really tricky thing: The second half has to say something completely different, or it isn't a reverso. One blogger's kid said -- she saw a poem that her mother had written, and her mother had said, Oh look, I think I've written a reverso. Her daughter said, No, Ma, that's a same-o, which I thought was so funny because the second half really just said the same thing. Not that there's anything wrong with that, that's clever also, but it's just not what a reverso is. That's something that I have to tell kids. A lot of the poems that I read by kids don't really say something else in the second half, but sometimes they do. The fact that the kids like writing these and it's a challenge for them is to me the most gratifying thing ever. Some of them are brilliant. Some of the ones I've come across are brilliant. And even the ones that are same-o's are really clever, so that's really good. So anyway, that's what a reverso is.

This editor really gave me a great idea, base them all on fairy tales. Fairy tales are great because they have usually multiple characters with different stories. If I can find a way to reverse what the first character is saying so that you have a second character saying something different, then I feel like I've really succeeded. The first two books of these are based on fairy tales, and the third one is based on Greek mythology, which also works. But I've written reversos just on other topics too.

NJ: Is there another -- is there a fourth reverso book coming?

MS: Not right now. I don't know whether there will be. We'll have to find out.

NJ: Have you had the same editor for all three of these?

MS: I did. *Mirror Mirror* was actually accepted by an editor who then left, and never really worked on it. Then Lucia Monfried became my editor, and she has been my editor for all three of the books, which is really helpful. It's good to have consistency.

NJ: What role does your editor, for this series, what role does she play? What's a poetry editor for you, and how--

MS: For this -- it was different for different series.

For this series, just to make sure that the rhymes make sense, reversed, that I've broken the poem up appropriately because sometimes in order to reverse it, the lines have to be exact. Sometimes there's just a single word on a line, just to make sure that that works. Sometimes she'll say, Well, this one doesn't work as well as the other ones. Let's not include this one in the book. Or, we have too many poems. Or, we need more poems. Those are things that she does. I think that's basically it. I haven't had a lot of, for the reversos, of my editor saying, I don't understand this.

Occasionally. For some of the other books, I've had more of that if they are nature poems, there's a different kind of clarity. I did a book called *Rutherford B., Who Was He? Poems About Our Presidents*. I have one coming out next year called, *Have You Heard About Lady Bird?* -- which is on the first ladies. Then I have one coming out, which has no title yet, which is on the presidential pets. For those, there's a lot of things, more things going on. They have to be accurate, historically. So, not only does my editor look into that, but we have a super fact checker, that's a different editor, Rotem Moscovich, who is phenomenal.

And there are -- all my editors will look at scansion. Does this scan properly? I mean, the reversos don't rhyme so it's not usually as much of an issue, but some of the poems in *Rutherford B.* and *Lady Bird* do rhyme. And my other books. People hear rhyme somewhat differently. If an editor says, I'm not hearing this, the editor is usually correct. My husband, Steve Aronson, also is really good at that. It's like, I'm not hearing the scanning quite properly. How are you reading it? Then I will read it out loud, and they'll go, Yes, but that's not how I'm hearing it, and that's not how most people are going to read it. Yes, so there's that.

Then, there could be things like, does this image really resonate? I haven't gotten too much of that, but occasionally someone will say that also. I think those are some of the main things. It would be interesting if you actually interviewed -- well, you've interviewed Sylvia. Did she talk about whether or not it's difficult to edit poetry?

NJ: We have interviewed

MS: Rebecca Davis?

NJ: Rebecca Davis, yes.

MS: I'm doing a book with Rebecca right now.

NJ: Oh you are? Is that one that you were just talking about, or is that another one?

MS: That's another one. I have three books coming out next year.

NJ: Oh my goodness. All illustrated collections?

MS: And they're all -- poetry books. Yes, which is really odd, and I hope they don't cancel each other out (laughter).

One is the *Lady Bird*, the one about the first ladies; one is with Rebecca, *I'm The Big One Now!*, which is poems about landmark experiences for 5- and 6-year-olds. That was really interesting because she's a really good and really tough editor, and she will say, This sounds cliché to me, how about a different image? Or, how about a different poem? But that's good, you know, that's a good thing. I think when I gave her the collection, she told me which poems she liked, and she said, I think we could use some more. That was fun. That was really good, so there's that too. We're building a collection, so you've got to have ample poems that are all strong.

The other book I have coming out is *Every Month Is A New Year*, and that's with Lee & Low. Louise May is my editor there. And that has been *the* most intense research I think I have ever done. I mean, the presidents and first ladies, that's pretty up there too, but this was just nuts, basically (laughter). What happened with that book is I -- well, how that book came about: I was walking around ALA, American Library Association convention, and I was looking at the exhibits. And I noticed there were tons and tons of Christmas books, a big surprise, right, and nothing on New Year's, nothing. I mean, zero. I thought, I wonder why? And I also wonder if there are even more New Year celebrations than I can think of. I knew Chinese New Year, Rosh Hashanah which is the Jewish New Year. I knew there were various things that went on around December 31st, January 1st. Hogmanay, I think I had heard of, that's in Scotland. But I wondered. I started to do research, and that was tricky because there are no books on New Year's (laughter).

NJ: Not in English.

MS: No. There were just none, I mean, there are virtually no children's books. The adult books that you would find would be on a specific culture, so that means you have to know what culture you were even looking for. The Internet was great. To be honest with you, I don't know if I would have been able to write this without the Internet because I looked at a lot of stuff there. Then I started to write to people. When you see this book, the acknowledgements are a paragraph that is huge. I talked to so many people, on the phone, email, I mean, in person, and people were so generous and helpful. No, I am not kidding, they were fantastic.

One of the things that happened was I wanted to write about the Muslim New Year, Muharram, and I found this book in the library which was written for young adults about being Muslim. I wrote to the author, Sumbul Ali-Karamali, and I wrote her an email, and the next thing I knew she called me up on the phone. She got my number, she called me up. We spent two hours on the phone. And I talked to her subsequent times, we've emailed. She was fantastic, I mean, just the information that she gave me.

I wanted to do something on the Mapuche New Year because that fell on a month that I needed to do another New Year for. I found a lawyer in Argentina whose grandmother had a collection of books about the Mapuche. And then I also found a tour guide who was really helpful. A couple of tour guides have been incredibly helpful, an Ethiopian tour guide who told me about Enkutatash, which is the Ethiopian New Year, which is on September 11th, by the way, always. But that's way back in history, because that was considered the day that the Queen of Sheba returned to Ethiopia and was given a gift of jewels. Enku means jewels.

People were great, and then I had to ask them to vet everything. The poems, the back matter, which is extensive, the way to say Happy New Year because we have a whole thing on Happy New Year, the glossary, I mean, just unbelievable. I felt like, oh my God, you know, these people. And it's taken -- it's really been a long time, it's taken years for this step, but it's coming out next year.

NJ: This is Lee & Low.

MS: Lee & Low, Louise May.

NJ: Who's illustrating it? Do you know?

MS: Yes, and now my brain just stopped. Oh, Susan L. Roth, whom I adore (laughter). Yes, one gorgeous, gorgeous collage work. I finally got to meet her. We had lunch with Louise, and then I ran into her at a conference. She's phenomenal. She is just phenomenal, and the art is spectacular. It really is. And she had to do a lot of, a lot of research also.

It's extremely important to me that I be respectful and accurate. But, sometimes I also need a little poetic license. Then the funniest examples of that was the Ethiopian poem. I wrote it in haiku, and then I sent it to my Source and I said, This is written in haiku. And he said, Well, we don't use haiku in Ethiopia, but he said, Ethiopians love poetry of all kinds, and your poem is so beautiful that everybody's just going to be happy. It's fine that it's in haiku, just keep it. I thought that was -- And then, I did actually come across some Ethiopian poets who were using haiku. But you know, I mean, that was really interesting to me. It just fell that way. I mean it came out that way.

And then my dance -- so my husband and I dance a lot. We've been taking dance lessons for 12 years, and two of our teachers are Ecuadorian, and they had been incredibly helpful about the Ecuadorian New Year. And they put me in touch with the Chilean Ambassador, former Chilean Ambassador to the UN, who also knew about the Mapuche, because Mapuche are in Argentina and Chile. People have just been incredible. I came across a Persian author, Homa Tavangar, and she just was really great about the Persian New Year. I talked to somebody in the Thai Embassy in Canada for Songkran. And it was just unbelievable.

I think people really want to be helpful. I really, I think that is a big driving force in people. I do. Greed is also a big driving force in people (laughter). And tribalism is a big driving force in people. But the desire to be helpful is, I think, as strong, I really mean that. I think if you show genuine interest in somebody's culture or somebody's interest. For my books on nature, the ethologists, the animal behaviorists, the zoologists that I've spoken to, have been very generous. If you are really interested in these things, it gives people opportunity to show what they know and to be helpful. Poetry has given me, and certainly prose too, nonfiction especially, it's given me the opportunity to experience that firsthand and to really enjoy it.

And then to get frustrated sometimes. We did a pronunciation guide in *Every Month Is A New Year*. That was the most difficult thing of the whole thing because everything was going to be an approximation. But we decided, oh, an approximation is fine.

NJ: Will that book have a QR code or an online so you can hear the pronunciation?

MS: You know, I don't know. That's a really good question, and I will ask Louise that, when she comes back from Mongolia, or wherever she is traveling right now (laughter).

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NJ: Learning about the New Year in Mongolia, right?

MS: She's incredible. Last year I think it was Morocco, I don't know. She goes to some really interesting places. That's a really good question, and I think it's good, yes.

NJ: Well anymore, with websites, that can be, I imagine, pretty easily included.

MS: Yes. I have a lot of websites --

NJ: And your own, I mean, that can literally be on your own website.

MS: I wonder if I could do that. The problem with that is those pronunciations get pulled from a lot of different sources, and some of them you can't even really find, like spoken. People give you sort of, This is how I hear it. But you can't necessarily find it. I'm not sure if the Mapuche one is online, but I think it might be.

NJ: Okay. That will be very interesting.

MS: Yes. So that's a good suggestion.

NJ: One of the things I hear you saying again and again with your poetry is how much research, and I don't believe folks think of poets as researchers.

MS: I think you're right.

NJ: Is that a surprise to you, from when you first started? When you first started, you were a child writing poetry, but so many of your books seem to have necessitated that.

MS: Does it surprise me that that's the case?

NJ: Probably not anymore, but.

MS: I'm trying to think. Well you know, it's interesting. With *Turtle in July*, which was the first book, that entailed some research, not as much as *Every Month Is A New Year*, but I had to go to zoos a lot and parks and wildlife areas and observe animals and read about them. I've always been interested in animals so that just flowed, to see how they behave and how they

act. So, it probably doesn't surprise me that I've done research. It probably has surprised me the amount of research that I have done recently. But I had done a lot of nonfiction books too, so I think (laughter) I was getting a hint that this was coming -- that there would be a lot of research involved.

The president book was a big surprise because I had -- it was not my idea. At that point, I didn't know very much about the presidents (laughter), did not know much about American history, I mean, whatever I learned in school, whatever books I read, yes. An editor suggested that I do it, and I thought, Really? I don't know if I can. Then I went home, I did some research, and I wrote eight poems, and then she was not allowed to accept the book. This happens, I probably should say this happens more frequently than anybody, any author would care to know that it happens, but it does. People -- several things happen. You can write your own book and people turn it down. People can suggest a book to you, and you prepare something, and then they can't do it for whatever reason. But somebody else often does. I was really fortunate that Stephanie Lurie at Hyperion, whom I adore, said, Let's, you know, how about, I'd like to do this book, but I want to see -- she said, I want to see some back matter -- or sidebars, or however you want to do it, to see what you would do with this. And I said, Fine. At that point, I had gotten an agent, the fantastic Brenda Bowen, who's also a brilliant editor. She said to me, Why don't you include one verso in this collection about Richard Nixon. And I said, What a good idea (laughter). He's been called Tricky Dick, and I thought, well, that would be really interesting. So that was part of my pitch. That was one of the poems. And Stephanie took it. The book's done really well for them. They signed up the first ladies, and now they've signed up Presidential pets (*Who Named Their Pony Macaroni?: Poems About White House Pets*).

NJ: They're doing all the --

MS: Yes, they're doing all of them.

NJ: Same illustrator?

MS: No, three different illustrators, which is really interesting to me. John Hendrix, fantastic, did the first one. Nancy Carpenter is doing the second one.

NJ: First Ladies.

MS: Yes. And a new illustrator, I'm going to get his name wrong. I think it's Ryan McAmis. He's brand new. And please forgive me if I don't match, but he's doing the third book. So that's what they decided to do, so three different illustrators. Do you think that's a good idea?

NJ: They're not the same book.

MS: Yes, I mean. My husband seems to think it'll be good. My editor seems to think it'll be good. And they're all good, so they're all fantastic.

NJ: You need to trust them. Now these, your reversos, let's go back.

MS: Same.

NJ: Same illustrator.

MS: Josée Masse. I'm going to meet her for the first time in a few weeks. She lives in Canada. I have never been to Canada. We're going to Montreal. No, never been to Canada. We're going to Montreal to visit our nephew, his wife, and our grandnephew. We have a brand new grandnephew. I wrote to Josée and I said, Josée, can we meet? And she said, Yes. So we're going to have brunch. I love her art. I own several pieces. I think she's phenomenal, and it should be a lot of fun. She's done all three of those. We always wanted to have, I mean we love her art.

NJ: I'm going to go back, again, the verso poems and the question about research. What kind of research did you do for these books?

MS: These were not as trying (laughter). I went back and read a lot of fairy tales. I had always loved fairy tales. My parents read them to me a lot. I went back and I read a lot of them. I tried to figure out which ones would work. There were a couple I attempted that just never, just didn't work very well. *The Brave Little Tailor*, I tried to write one, "Seven in one blow." I don't know, I just couldn't -- I think it's because it's just the tailor's voice, there's a giant or something. I tried *The Fisherman and His Wife*, and that one I couldn't do. Do you know that fairy tale?

NJ: Yes, I do.

MS: Yes, that one didn't work either. But there's plenty of fairy tales. So that's what I did. And then the opening and closing poems are original about fairy tales. And the Greek myths, the same thing, I went and I read a lot of the myths, tried to decide which ones would work. I really enjoyed, I enjoyed all of them. Writing about Greek mythology was so nice, though, because it took me back to days in junior high and high school when we'd done mythology. I think it was mostly in junior -- we called it junior high instead of middle school at that time. I really loved the myths. That's a question I get asked a lot, Who's your favorite god or goddess?

NJ: Oh.

MS: I tell the kids, Well, it used to be Athena, but now my favorite god is Hermes because I like the trickster aspect of it (laughter). So that's basically what I did. That was nice. It was just reading. Then I had to write little synopses for them. I had to refresh my memory. So, things go from not a lot of research to vast amounts of research.

NJ: And your back matter, you said, in the new book, that will include a -- *Every Month Is A New Year*.

MS: A ton of back matter, a lot of back matter.

And also the first ladies book has a lot of back matter. The problem with both the presidents and the first ladies is we can't include all of this stuff. My poor editor has been having to winnow down the stuff that I've given her, and then she'll send it to me and go, What do you think? She hates editing it down because all of it is interesting. It's fascinating stuff. Somebody asked me a question, Okay, so which presidents did you find boring? I said, None of them. I said, They became president. They're not boring. They may have been lousy presidents (laughter), sure, they may have been good presidents, but none of them were boring to me.

And some of them were really surprising to me. The first ladies I knew even less about. Who knows much about most of these first ladies. We know a little bit about Eleanor Roosevelt, Abigail Adams, maybe Mary Todd Lincoln. But yes, some of them, nothing, we know nothing. That was really interesting to find out about them. Some of them did just extraordinary things that you don't necessarily even think about.

NJ: Was there a first lady you "met" in your research, you said, This person, I would like to spend time with?

MS: Actually, two of the first ladies that -- it surprised me how much I was fascinated by them, and they're fairly recent. Lady Bird Johnson, I really would have liked to talk with her about wild flowers. And she was a very interesting soul. And Betty Ford, fascinating woman. Betty Ford did so many positive things. Announcing to the world that she had a problem with addiction and that she had breast cancer. Women started doing self-examinations because of her -- just really fascinating.

Then there were ones that were just so sad. I mean, Franklin Pierce's wife, Jane Pierce, was one of the saddest stories I ever read. Oh, this is a terrible story. Do you want me to -- They had three children, two of who died of disease, and then they had one. She hated politics. She really wanted him to get out of politics. He said that he would, and then he was urged to run for president. They were on some trip on a train, it wasn't the inauguration, it was something. I don't remember if he was campaigning or what. They were on a train. There was a train accident and their son was decapitated in front of them. She blamed politics. She said God was punishing them. She basically hid in her room in the White House for about two years. And she wrote letters to her dead son. It's just a terrible, awful, painful story, but fascinating, but awful. I just felt for this poor woman.

NJ: How do you write, knowing all that, how do you write a poem about someone like that, for kids?

MS: You write a sad poem, basically. I mean, you do. It's a poem of mourning, basically that's what it is. I mean, the poems in that book are not for very little kids.

I would say probably kids start studying presidents maybe 3rd grade, 4th grade, something like that. So, that's what you do. You write something that's heartfelt. Some of the poems are in the first person, some of them are not. I had the opportunity to play with that. I'm not going to talk about my politics, but I had to be very nonpartisan, in both books, and really just try to get into the person. So that's been, that's been interesting and tricky. Then some of the poems, well, some of them -- the poem about Hillary Clinton was a place holder because we didn't know what was going to happen. I had to really finish that poem after the election. The first book doesn't have a poem about Trump because he wasn't president then. But this one has a poem about Melania Trump, so that was added after the election. As I said, sometimes I don't know exactly where things are going to go, you know. Even with the first book, we didn't know whether I was going to have to add one about Romney until after that election. Then I didn't, so that was the case there. But they were so interesting. And you know, people who did things

that I wouldn't agree with, also did things I did agree -- they were very complicated people. I found it just fascinating. I really do. I think it's, on the whole, better to try to look at all sides of people. That doesn't mean that you still don't get angry or you don't agree or things like that. But I think it's good to try to get a fuller picture. Also, to know what the time was like. No, really, I mean it's just -- but I found it fascinating. Things that I never knew I would be so interested in, I've just been really interested in.

And there's a fantastic C-SPAN series on all of the first ladies. There are actual documentaries that you can watch online, and I watched every single one of them. There's a book that compiles them too. That was so helpful to me because they have photographs where there were photographs, or portraits, or things that they owned or wore -- where they lived or something like that. I went to see the first ladies exhibit at the Smithsonian, which is really nice. And what I would really like is to, maybe I'll get to meet some of the first ladies.

Okay, this is one of my favorite stories. We were in our favorite bookstore in Washington, Connecticut, The Hickory Stick. Our friend Wendell Minor was doing a signing. He lives there and we have a house there. We're there sometimes, he's there all the time with his wife Florence. We went to the signing, and Wendell said, Is that Hillary Clinton? And I said, What? No, come on. And he said, Well, there's three secret service guys around. He walked up to her and he said, Are you Hillary Clinton? She said, Yes, I am. We went over, we talked with her. And I, when I meet famous people sometimes, dumb things come out of my mouth, and I went, I said, What are you doing here? (Laughter) Probably in that kind of a high voice, too. What are you doing here? And she said, Well, my husband and I needed a break. They were campaigning for Obama at that point, then they were taking a break. They had friends in the area. And I said, Your husband is here too? (Laughter) She goes, He's right over there. He was looking at the biographies. They came over and we talked with them for 15 minutes. They were like regular people talking to you. We talked about politics. My husband's first cousin is Russ Feingold, who had been the senator from Wisconsin. We talked about that. We talked about a lot of things, and it was just amazing. And then, Wendell said, Are you allowed to accept a gift of books. She said, Yes, if it's under a certain amount of money, we can. She said, We have a lot of children in the family. So we hustled. I gave her *Mirror Mirror*, and I think a *Tallulah* book. I promised the bookstore that I would give them back the book. Wendell gave them some books. And interestingly enough -- So my Tallulah books are about this little ballet dancer. They're prose picture books. They're illustrated by Alexandra Boiger. The sixth one is coming out. That's coming out next year too. I have four books coming out next year (laughter), fortunately one of them is prose. Alexandra has illustrated Chelsea Clinton's book. She persisted. There is an interview in which Chelsea Clinton said, Well, we loved the *Tallulah*

books, so we're really glad that Alex. And I'm like, What is going on here? This is just really, really wild. I had no idea if it came from that or if they just knew the books anyway. So that was that. So, I did get to meet a first lady.

NJ: Will you send them your *President, First Lady, and Pets* book?

MS: I hope my publisher will do that.

NJ: Yes, they should.

MS: I'm going to ask them to do that. I don't know how you can get that through to them. This was very easy, here's the book.

NJ: They'll figure it out.

MS: I'd love to meet some of these first ladies. I actually think, I should tell them this, I think they should actually try to get a copy to Laura Bush because she was a librarian and she's a big promoter of literacy. And so is Barbara Bush (laughter).

NJ: Regular people. They're human beings, as you discovered, the complexity, in your research.

MS: I didn't feel like any of it was put on. I just felt like they were there. They were talking like regular people.

NJ: Because they are.

MS: Because they are. I think it's probably refreshing for them also. A follow-up funny story that -- our lawn mower, the guy who was mowing our lawn, got married. He got married at this place called Mayflower, which is right there. They're about to leave, and then they hear, Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. It was Bill and Hillary, they were staying at the Mayflower. Bill wanted to get into the picture with the new bride and groom, so they took a photo, and it was on the front page of the local newspaper. I think it's cute, and he's really cute, but I mean there was a genuine -- I think one of the reasons Bill Clinton became president is because he genuinely likes hanging out with people. Whatever you think about that, that's your business, but he genuinely likes hanging out with people. I think that she does too. I've heard that she's much more comfortable with smaller groups, and that would seem to be in evidence.

I would love to meet Michelle Obama, that would be nice. (Laughter) I would love to meet any, I mean, really, I would love to meet Rosalynn Carter, another very interesting person. We did see Jimmy Carter once at an airport, but we couldn't get close enough. It was like, Hello.

NJ: Just talk about your NCTE award. How did you know you were selected? What was your response? How has that changed any of your work or your life, or has it?

MS: Well, it was the day after, I think, my husband's birthday, and we had taken a dance workshop. And we went out for brunch with our three dance teachers, our teacher Laurie, her husband Ricardo, and her brother-in-law Jose Luis, so all of them have taught us dance. And Jande, Jose's wife, and I think that was it. I don't remember if anybody else was there. We were sitting in a restaurant, and Steve was looking at his phone, as he is want to do, even though I sometimes say, Put your phone down! (Laughter) He was looking at his phone. And on his phone -- I don't know if he was looking at my email also. I don't know why. I don't even remember why. Or if he was looking at Facebook, something. I don't remember exactly what it was. Jacqueline Woodson had sent me a note, Congratulations, you won! Jackie's a friend. She lives in Park Slope. And it was like, Steve said, I'm about to tell you something that's going to make you very happy. You just -- They just announced it, she was at the luncheon. I was not there, I was in New York. He said, You just won the NCTE award for poetry. At which point I started crying. You're crying now. (Laughter) I started crying. Everybody at the table were congratulating me. I was like, Oh my God. Because to be honest with you, of all of the awards out there, that is the one that I personally, most wanted to win. It just means a lot to me, because it's an award for excellence in poetry. Because I write other things, but I write a lot of poetry. Because it comes from teachers. And I just, I was like, Wow! So, then I knew that I was just going to have to write speeches and do that. And Terrell Young...

NJ: Terry Young.

MS: Yes. Terrell, is that right, he pronounces it Terrell? It's not Ter-rell, it's Terr-ell, and Terry is his name. I had also been invited to speak at Brigham Young, so I did that too. It was like a whole thing. And by the way, that's one of the best conferences I've ever been to in my life. He was on the committee, and there were a bunch -- So anyhow, then I knew I had to write a speech, an acceptance speech, and I was also going to do a workshop. I think I had a PowerPoint that I knew that I could basically use for the workshop, but I knew I had to write a speech. I wanted, I always want to do something that's heartfelt and sincere, not like bloviate, or whatever.

But I decided to do something that scared the hell out of me. And what that was (laughter), was to sing in front of, what, like 200 people were there, more? I don't know. A lot of people. But it had to fit with poetry. This goes back to when I was a kid and my parents sang me these songs. And I liked them. I didn't quite know what they were about when I was 2, but one of the songs was "Baby Face," and I thought, I liked singing it and thought it was just about sweethearts. I didn't realize -- no, I thought it was about babies. It took me a while to realize it was about sweethearts. I thought it was about babies.

My family used to go to a hotel in the Catskills. And one night, it was family night, they were showing cartoons. At the end of it, the MC got up and he said, Now we're going to have a special treat, little Miss Marilyn Singer is going to get up and sing for us. At this hotel, I used to stand on an empty stage during the daytime and just sing into a dead mic, just for fun. I didn't realize this guy was hearing me. My mother was certainly hearing me. Apparently, they concocted this thing that I was going to get up and sing, but nobody told me about it. I burst into tears and ran out of the room, and I never sang, because I wasn't going to do that in front of those people. I was scared and I wasn't prepared.

So, I decided I would do it. I sang "Baby Face" in front of all these people, and then I said, Well how does that fit with poetry? I said, Well, when I was little, I thought it was about babies, and then when I got older I realized it was about sweethearts, and then when I got older still, I started really looking at the words and going, hmm, that's a good line; that's not such a good line. That's how I started to look at all songs and all lyrics and all poems. That is what really helped me become a good poet. So that was the basis of the speech. I think it went -- Were you there?

NJ: Yes.

MS: Did you like it?

NJ: Yes.

MS: I think it really went over well. I was at the table with Joyce Sidman, because she's my good friend and I invited her. I think they gave me two tickets, and I invite Joyce and of course my husband. My editor Rotem, from the *President* books was there, and Rotem sings. And I said, I'm really scared. She said, Don't be scared, you'll do fine, you'll be good. And I asked her and she said it was great. People were there from Dial, people were there from Chronicle, all of whom had published my books. It was really, it was a very friendly, warm table too. I felt good

about it. I felt really -- I felt like not only had I given a speech that really meant something to me, but (laughter) -- it's like I broke a curse or something.

NJ: Right.

MS: You know, I did this thing! I mean, like, look, I can do it! I'm still not going skydiving (laughter).

NJ: Little Marilyn Singer, right?

MS: Little Marilyn Singer. Little Marilyn Singer finally completed her task, or something like that. So that was really good. And then I've done some big conferences. I've spoken at some of those.

Here's the funny thing though. Have I sold more manuscripts since winning this award? I don't know. Publishers still are struggling selling poetry, so I hear from publishers, Oh we love you, we love your books, but, Can we have something else? That happened to me recently, and actually I did sell something else, then that was not a poetry collection. Some of them are saying things like, Everything has to tie into the curriculum, everything, every collection, thematically.

No, I know, but everything. Some of them say things like, We don't want any more books on animals, because we've got enough of them. So, it's hard for me to know. Some of the books that I have out now, I would have thought would have sold a lot more copies, and it's not always the case. *Mirror Mirror* continues to sell brilliantly. But the other two books of reversos not as much. I really would have thought that the Greek mythology one would have just maybe even outstripped this, but it hasn't. I don't know why. I sometimes wonder if people actually know that these books exist. I think the fact that there aren't so many bookstores anymore, where people can browse and find out about them, I think that's one problem. But I'm sure there are a bunch of other -- you probably know more about. I don't know how people find out what books are out there. Because there's an awful lot of books. I certainly don't know everything that's out there.

I mean, I adore Sylvia Vardell, and one of the many reasons I adore her, besides the fact that she's an incredible advocate for poetry, is that she puts out a list every year. These are the poetry books that are coming out. I find that really helpful because I'm the cohost of the Poetry

Blast at the American Library Association convention, and I have to write to all the publishers and say, What poets have you got coming out? Sylvia's list helps. They often don't want to sponsor people unless it's an award-winning book. I can't believe many of them, because money is money is money is money is money. I'm not saying this to bad mouth publishers, because I love the publishers. I know that there's difficulties in all of this. I would like to believe that there -- I know that kids really like poetry. I know this because I've talked to enough kids. Something funky happens in around high school, I think, or maybe even upper middle school. I don't know what that is. It used to be, I think, that poetry was taught badly. I don't even think that that's the case anymore. I don't know what happens. But there's seems to be declining interest, as kids get older. Except for verse novels, which, you know, I think have a different audience. But in any case, collections of poetry, I think, have difficulty. I'd like to believe that there's a way of getting this stuff out there more. I still think that a lot of teachers are scared of it, too. I have no idea what one does about that. That's not my purview.

NJ: Right. But your contribution is so important.

MS: Thank you. I can't complain either, because I've done pretty well, and I know I've done a lot better than a lot of other people. But it makes me sad that I feel like a lot of people should be doing well.

NJ: And one of the goals, we hope, in PoetryCHaT and our special collection is to contribute to lifting poetry, making it more present, and our audience includes teachers and librarians and kids. So let's do that full circle. Let's go back to *Mirror Mirror*.

MS: Okay.

NJ: And my students certainly love, my 8th graders loved this book. Would you read something from *Mirror Mirror* to kind of wrap us up here?

MS: I will. I mean, would you like -- well, okay, let me ask you. The one that I read most often, because it's the easiest one to give an example of what a reverso is, is "In the Hood." That has been out on several sites, but I don't mind reading it again. Would you like that, or would you like me to read --

NJ: Why don't you do both.

MS: I'll do both. I'll end with "In the Hood."

Here's "Have Another Chocolate," which is based on "Hansel and Gretel." And you can guess who's speaking first and who is speaking second:

Fatten up, boy!
Don't you
like prime rib?
Then your hostess she will roast you
goose.
Have another chocolate.
Eat another piece of gingerbread.
When you hold it out,
your finger
feels like
a bone.
Fatten up.
Don't
keep her waiting...

Keep her waiting.
Don't
fatten up.
A bone
feels like
your finger
when you hold it out.
Eat another piece of gingerbread,
have another chocolate –
Goose!
Then your hostess, she will roast you
like prime rib.
Don't you
fatten up, boy!

Here's "In the Hood," based on "Little Red Riding Hood." And again, I think you can guess who the first and second speakers are:

In my hood,
skipping through the wood,
carrying a basket,
picking berries to eat –
juicy and sweet
what a treat!
But, a girl
mustn't dawdle.
After all, Grandma's waiting.

After all, Grandma's waiting,
Mustn't dawdle...
But, a girl!
What a treat –
juicy and sweet,
picking berries to eat,
carrying a basket,
skipping through the wood
in my 'hood.

NJ: Thank you, Marilyn Singer.

MS: Thank you!

(End of audio recording)

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Children & Teen Poetry Collection (PoetryCHaT)