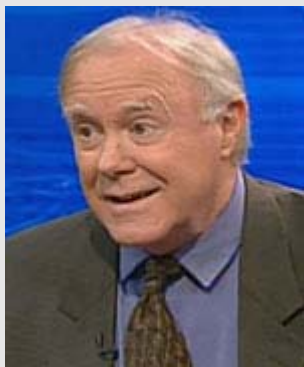


# Robert Hass Discusses His Pulitzer Prize-Winning Poetry

"Time and Materials" by Robert Hass won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for poetry, becoming the first book of poetry since 1983 to win both the Pulitzer and the National Book Award. Hass talks about the collection.



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JEFFREY BROWN: There were actually two winners in the poetry category this year. Philip Schultz won for his book "Failure" and Robert Hass for his book "Time and Materials," which also won the National Book Award.

Hass is a noted translator and teacher at the University of California at Berkeley. He served as poet laureate for two years in the mid-'90s, the last time he joined us on this program.

So I can say welcome back, and congratulations to you.

ROBERT HASS, Poet: Thank you, Jeff, very much.

JEFFREY BROWN: I think I'm right that many of these poems in this collection were written at a time when you had various public roles.

ROBERT HASS: That's right.

JEFFREY BROWN: Laureate, you were writing a column, doing various things. So what did these poems represent for you?

ROBERT HASS: Well, I don't know what they represented, but they were a way of checking in with myself, inside that life, that is, I could be -- you know, I could be on a train heading from New York to some place in New Jersey, and see the lights burning out over the grasslands, and say to myself, "Secret, there's fire out over the grasslands."

It was a way of -- if lines came to me, it was like checking in with myself. "You still there?" "Yes, I'm still there."

JEFFREY BROWN: Checking in with yourself while you're living this public life, talking up poetry to the world.

ROBERT HASS: Yes. Yes.

# The problem of describing trees

JEFFREY BROWN: There's a poem early on here that maybe you could read for us, because it gets at a lot of different themes that you write about. Could you read that for us? It's called "The Problem of Describing Trees."

ROBERT HASS: "The Problem of Describing Trees." So I think another thing that happened because of this distraction hiatus is that, when you return to the materials of the art, there's a thing of, what kind of an instrument is this that you were doing?

JEFFREY BROWN: Poetry?

ROBERT HASS: Yes, what are you doing with it? So this is "The Problem of Describing Trees."

The aspen glitters in the wind.

And that delights us.

The leaf flutters, turning,

Because that motion in the heat of August

Protects its cells from drying out. Likewise the leaf

Of the cottonwood.

The gene pool threw up a wobbly stem

And the tree danced. No.

The tree capitalized.

No. There are limits to saying,

In language, what the tree did.

It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us.

Dance with me, dancer. Oh, I will.

Mountains, sky,

The aspens doing something in the wind.

JEFFREY BROWN: Now, the line, "There are limits to saying in language what the tree did."

ROBERT HASS: Yes.

# Limits of saying anything

JEFFREY BROWN: By implication, there are limits to say anything.

ROBERT HASS: Yes. I mean, there are two ways of saying this -- or there are a million ways of saying this. One way is to say what Wittgenstein said, language philosophy in the early 20th century, "The limits of my language are the limits of my world," which I don't think is quite true.

And the other is to say what Ed Wilson, the environmentalist and entomologist, biogeographer said, which is that every species lives in its own sensory world and, at some point, it dawns on you that you just -- we don't have a language for what would be the experience of a tree or, for that matter, a fox or a robin. So...

JEFFREY BROWN: So much of your work is about trying to examine or describe things like that. And I think I can understand the problem of finding the right words or any words.

But what I am not sure I understand -- and maybe this is what distinguishes poets from the rest of us -- is, why the need to describe trees? What is the burden on you that you must come up with a way to describe the world?

ROBERT HASS: My mind goes straight to my dear friend and mentor, Czeslaw Milosz, who...

JEFFREY BROWN: Great poet.

ROBERT HASS: ... great poet, and he was born in Lithuania in 1911. And he lived through much of the worst violence of the 20th century in Europe. He lost so much that I know -- I came to understand about him.

One of his poems begins, "Reality, what is it in words?" I came to understand about him that he'd lost so much that he felt like everything he didn't get down -- if he didn't get it down, nothingness won, you know?

JEFFREY BROWN: If he didn't get it down into a poem...

ROBERT HASS: Yes, nothingness won. He had this sense that, if art doesn't somehow preserve our memory of the gift of life on Earth we've lost, so something like that.

# On teaching and translating poetry

JEFFREY BROWN: Is that -- and you're well known as a translator of his works and others, a teacher and a poet. Is that how you have come through the years to see what the work of a poet is?

ROBERT HASS: Yes, it's somehow -- yes, I have to say, also, the work of teaching poetry. I feel like I get to pass onto people, you know, what Emily Dickinson said it was like to be alive on a winter afternoon in New England in the middle of the 19th century, you know?

I get to say there's a certain slant of light winter afternoons that oppresses, like Whitman's lines about summer grasses in New York State.

the Japanese poet, that just -- a haiku that just goes, "Deep autumn, my neighbor. How does he live, I wonder?"

JEFFREY BROWN: "How does he live, I wonder?"




ROBERT HASS: "I wonder?" Terrific old poem that just ends with this interrogative in Japanese. And one of the places you can find an answer to that question is in poetry and in music and in art. It's where we say to each other, "This is what it's like to be alive."

JEFFREY BROWN: All right, Robert Hass, congratulations to you, and it's nice to talk to you again.

ROBERT HASS: Thanks. Thanks very much, Jeff. Nice to see you.

JUDY WOODRUFF: You can hear Robert Hass read more poems and ask him your own questions in our online Insider Forum by visiting our Web site at PBS.org.

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