



An Interview with Cornelius Eady.

Cornelius Eady is the author of six volumes of poetry including Pulitzer Prize nominee *The Gathering of My Name* (1991) and National Book Award nominee *Brutal Imagination* (2001). This interview was conducted by Seattle Arts & Lectures' Website and Publications Director Samantha Storey for the February 2002 Organization Newsletter.

SS: Why did you start writing poetry?

CE: When I was in high school, I was lucky enough to run into a high school teacher who illuminated the fact that I had a talent with language. I think that's what fanned the flame or actually gave the spark to the flame. I suddenly realized that I could write and just kept trying to explore that.

SS: What are you trying to achieve with your writing?

CE: I guess different poets do have what you would call "an agenda." They're apt to reveal certain things or to point certain things out. One of the things that keeps appearing in my work is the theme of family. Another one is music and I think that's something that has always been a companion to me as a writer. And, of course, the experience of being an African-American in this culture, in this era, has always been one of those recurring themes that keeps coming back in different ways.

SS: Many of your poems seem like lyrics to songs, particularly blues music. Could you talk about that?

CE: I really enjoy the idea of the language that's inside of music itself. The idea that maybe when you hear a jazz solo, or when you're hearing a good saxophonist, or a guitarist, that you're actually hearing that person's story. They're telling you a little tale. That has always fascinated me. I try to find a way to translate or interpret what I hear in music. I just think musicians are very noble. Maybe that's giving too much of a spin to them, but I think they do really amazing and necessary work in our culture.

SS: What techniques do you use for discovering new subject matter?

CE: I never know when a poem is going to surprise me. Sometimes I have to work for it and sometimes I'll be walking down a street and hear a snippet of conversation and I'm off. There are no real set rules.

SS: What inspired you to write the series of poems in *Brutal Imagination* on Susan Smith? [The woman who invented a black kidnapper in 1994 to cover up the fact that she murdered her two small sons.]

CE: A friend of mine, a novelist, presented the idea to me because he was writing about the case and threw out the idea that what if this guy was actually alive for nine days. It was such a fascinating concept. I kept thinking about things like what kind of shoes does he wear, and what's the sound of his voice, and what does it actually feel like to be in that predicament. From that the poem started to evolve and eventually became the book *Brutal Imagination*, and now, a play.

SS: Did you conduct any research when writing these poems? Were you able to talk to anyone involved in the case, like Susan Smith?

CE: No. Actually, I got most of my information from the Internet. The local newspaper in that town, Union, South Carolina, or maybe it was the town over that has the newspaper, has a web site with the entire case from the first report of the car-jacking to the verdict. There are also a lot of crime web sites that dealt with it. They had good details about the case and the people involved with it.

SS: Did you learn anything from writing these poems that surprised you?

CE: I think the things I learned weren't real revelations or epiphanies in any way, sense, or form. It was depressing to find out, for example, that Susan Smith had such a horrible life. She'd been abused in so many ways and by so many people. You realize that it was one more branch of that horrible tree. If there's anything about this case that might be good, or at least something that might be close to a happy ending, it is the fact that there's no innocent black guy sitting on death row in South Carolina right now. And that's because of the efforts of the Sheriff and the FBI, who luckily decided about the second or third day in, not to believe Susan's story at face value.

SS: Could you talk about how you get into the minds of your characters—people as different as Susan Smith, Rodney King, and your own father?

CE: I just try and find a way of making it seem or feel human. In terms of the Rodney King case, for example, it was just the idea of that video being played over and over and the idea of how unjust that moment was. That underneath there was a human being who was being beaten, not some sort of representative of the African-American race, but a real person who was being beaten. I'm hoping I set the poems up so that the reader can enter into that. If you are a human being you have to feel that idea: "Oh, my God. Here I am surrounded by these cops and they just keep beating me and there is nothing I can do to stop this moment." With my Dad, again, I wanted to let the reader know this is a person who lived a life, good, bad, different, whatever it was. He had feelings I was trying to honor. Hopefully, again, I allowed the reader to enter into the relationship between me and him.

SS: Are there writers you turn to for inspiration or influence?

CE: All the time. There are too many to mention, I think. There are a lot of younger writers who I really admire, who keep me at it. I'm thinking of people like Terrance Hayes. I'm really talking about the Cave Canem people; the people I teach workshops with every summer. I feel I am immersed in this group of young writers who are just tearing the world up. I was also reading some of Langston Hughes this afternoon to get ready for a class I am going to teach next week. Again, I'm astonished by the range in his work.

SS: If you could recommend one book to our audience what would it be?

CE: Terrance Hayes's next book is about to come out and is called *Hip Logic* and Meg Kearney's book *An Unkindness of Ravens*.