Heart to Heart With Jericho Brown About Poetry, Race and HIV

In his Pulitzer Prize–winning poetry, Jericho Brown reveals how HIV, race and rape can coexist with joy, lust and love. Plus: Brown walks us through some of his poems.

May 17, 2021 By Trent Straube

Jericho Brown's third collection of poems, The Tradition, won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. The Pulitzer website described his work as "a collection of masterful lyrics that combine delicacy with historical urgency in their loving evocation of bodies vulnerable to hostility and violence."

Casual readers might think Brown's poetry focuses on racism and Trump's America. Yet there's much more in his work in terms of subject matter and historical sweep—joy, eros, nature, same-gender love, poets from the past. Brown also writes of being raped and subsequently diagnosed with HIV. As he tells POZ in this lightly edited interview, he kept his HIV status a secret for years, until poetry helped him accept his truth and use his voice to help others.

You won the Pulitzer Prize last May, right as COVID-19 struck and racial tensions roiled the nation. When you were doing press for The Tradition and the Pulitzer, did people bring up the HIV or same-sex elements in your work?

It comes up when queer people interview me. Otherwise, it's all about Black stuff. But when I'm talking about the poems, it's impossible not to talk about the thread of disease or the thread of queerness. So yeah, it does come up but because I bring it up.

References to things like "a virus" or "the virus" come up in my work a great deal. The interesting thing the COVID pandemic has done for my work is, it has broadened the facts of those references, and, I think, it has changed our judgment about them. Something you write can change over time given other people's circumstances. So many people have had COVID and so many people have died that I think it might change our understanding of health disparities among communities.

Poetry is always waiting for its moment. Things that have been written a very long time ago make an impact now because the moment has been waiting for that. It takes a long time to write a poem—I'd give a poem four years on average—and many of my poems we think call out to the current moment were written long before the current moment. I wrote a book, yes, that has a lot to do with the Trump era if you think of the Trump era, and that has a lot to do with police if you think about police, or trees if you think about trees. But I really just wrote the poems of my heart. It turns out to be the saddest thing and the most fortuitous thing [that soon after the] Pulitzer was announced was the murder of George Floyd. There were several [similar murders] that summer. So obviously, people think, Oh, this book is about that summer.

We now have a new administration. Are you optimistic about the future?

Am I optimistic about a change in the way police treat Black people? I don't think so. But I am optimistic about the resistance people have to that. I'm not one of these people who think things are just like they were in 1964. They're not! So I do believe in progress. I wish progress were not as slow. And I do not like being called a liar. I don't like seeing generation after generation after generation of Black people being called a liar over how we are treated by the police. We are not making this up!

And yes, it is a tradition in Black families to talk to your sons and daughters about how to deal with the police in certain ways, which really have to do with: Be prepared to be humiliated, and take the humiliation so that you might be able to live.

You now live in Atlanta, where you're a professor at Emory University and the director of its creative writing program. But where did you grow up, and how would you describe it?

I'm originally from Shreveport, Louisiana, [from] a blue-collar, violent, religious home. It was very Louisiana in that my parents thought it was important that my sister and I know how to play spades. There were always gatherings where people were eating food that was very spicy. I sang in choir growing up because we had to be active in the church. But there was also a lot of stuff

that’s traditional that I’d like to get rid of. My parents and grandparents were amazing, some of the hardest-working people I’ve ever met. They loved us, and education was important to them. And they were mean! Which I think parents were, by the way. I don’t think that’s special to my parents.

Have they changed their attitudes now that you've got a Pulitzer?

They don't care. My dad, he's the kind of guy who thinks if I write about him, he should get a cut of the money. Do you know what I'm saying?

How did they respond to your coming out as gay and HIV positive?

They don't like it. We have a relationship based on the fact that I did everything in my power to be as independent as possible. I think other people have a hard time coming out, and part of the reason is that they still have dependency with their family. If I go to my mom and dad's house and things get crazy, I can get in a car and leave.

But I have to say, one thing about the pandemic is, I've felt I should be living closer to my mom and dad. I want to be there—because they're older and I don't trust them. [Laughs] I want to make sure they're staying in the house! It's interesting how things change. Since the pandemic, we talk now more than we ever did even when I lived there.

References to domestic violence and an abusive father appear in your poems, as do same-sex rape and HIV, all of which are autobiographical. If you're comfortable with it, can you recount this latter narrative?

I was a late bloomer when it comes to gay sex. I was one of those people who thought if you do everything except penetration, then you aren't actually gay. But then I moved to Houston [for college] and started having sex. I was very careful, actually. At that time, there weren't apps to be had. It must have been 2002, and I was 26. I met a guy online, something like Adam4Adam but for Black guys. Anyway, this guy came over. I remember thinking that we were going to do all those things except penetration and him clearly wanting to do penetration. I remember telling him, "Oh, never mind," and then he raped me. Which, you know, it's in the book now. And then he left. I knew I had been raped because of how he left, not because of what had happened. I remember lying there and thinking, I better get in the shower in case something is wrong—as if, if I had HIV, I could wash it out, you know what I mean? I kept thinking, I fucked up. I felt like I had given the wrong idea to someone, in spite of having said no.

And then some time passed, and I had shingles, a rash that wasn't painful across my ribcage. I went to a doctor, and he asked me, "Are you gay?" and gave me a test. A few days later, he called to tell me I was HIV positive. I was like, "Oh." He's like, "Do you have a doctor?" I said, "No, but I'll get a doctor." I started seeing a doctor named Gary Brewton who had a long history of working with men who are HIV positive. I was so lucky to have him and to be living in Houston instead of a small town. He told me my numbers were good enough that I didn't need to be on medication, but he wanted to keep me under observation.

The other part of the story is that when you find out you have HIV in 2002, you feel like you're going to die. My doctor assured me I wasn't, but that didn't get rid of the feeling. And this is a little

bit narcissistic, but I remember feeling like this was really just to make sure that I stay lonely forever: Now, I'll never have a boyfriend.

Did you disclose your status to anyone?

I didn't tell people I had HIV. It was hard enough having people understand I was gay. The thing I didn't know then that I know now is that because of the meds that I did eventually get on, the likelihood of me passing HIV on to somebody else is effectively zero. I didn't know that.

You're referring to U=U, or Undetectable Equals Untransmittable. That was not widely accepted until a few years ago. People with HIV say that learning about U=U is transformative.

Exactly. For me, I had felt like there was something in me that I could put into somebody else, and that thing was a stain, and therefore, I needed to stay away from folks. But I also wanted to be a person in the world. I wanted to be a poet. I was a graduate student at the time. I was learning so much. I was living in Houston, the biggest city I'd ever seen in my life! So I would never tell anybody. And I wasn't comfortable bringing it up in my writing until my second book [The New Testament] came out in 2014. I wrote about being raped in my first book [Please, 2008].

How did you get to that level of comfort with disclosing these facts?

My writing is my religion. It is the thing I go to to figure out what I'm thinking and what I really believe about myself and if I'm in love. Writing for me is about investigation and discovery.

What did you discover?

Maybe I'll sound cliché or New Age–y, but I was brought back to the fact that I'm a child of God. [Laughs]

Are you a religious person, in the Christian sense?

Maybe a little bit but not all the way. I do believe that there is ultimate human value. I know it sounds crazy to say there is something lifted about us when we had the last president that we had, and we saw how his supporters were willing to watch other people die for no reason. And yet, I still believe that there is this ultimate human value, and if I can believe that about everybody else, then why is it that I refuse to believe it about myself?

Also, I felt like there were people who had HIV that turned to AIDS and they died. But I didn't die. I was able to write about HIV because I thought of it as a responsibility. It becomes my responsibility as a poet to tell the truth, and as long as there's something I know I'm keeping from the page, not from people—fuck people—if I'm not addressing it on the page, in my poems, then I'm not facing it myself and being honest about it. When I finally started writing about that, it changed my mind about it, and I began to understand that I'm still Jericho Brown—a better Jericho Brown. Suddenly, I was glad. I had survived something that my idols didn't.

Your work name-checks queer Black artists like poet Essex Hemphill and filmmaker Marlon Riggs, both of whom were lost to AIDS. Is that artistic lineage at the forefront of your mind?

I'm always thinking about tradition. I think a great deal about the fact that there are people who walked this earth and could not experience the freedoms I now experience, and yet they did things just so I could experience those freedoms and privileges. It's hard for me to talk about [these artists] without getting emotional. I think I would have had a better understanding of how to move forward in the world if some of those people had lived through the '80s and '90s. Now it's a lot to assume they would have been my best friend. [Laughs] And yet I do have this belief in the community of artists and, specifically, a belief in the community of queer Black artists.

Do you believe poetry and art can change people?

Yes, because I know it affects me, and I know I'm not special in that regard. Writing has changed my life. Poems have kept me alive and kept me going. Poetry gives me energy. Poetry changes my mind. Poetry wakes me up. When people talk about poetry making change, it's like they're expecting poetry to make some sort of governmental change. But poetry happens in your heart, to you, the individual.

Poetry is a love language. Poetry is from one person to one person. It’s not like a film or a pop song, which is from one person to many people. Poetry really happens from heart to heart.

Jericho BrownEley/@Eley_Photo

Finding Truth, Line by Line

The artist discusses his process. Plus, an example in the poem “The Tradition.”

Jericho Brown is not the sort of poet who knows what he’s going to write about before he sits down and gets to work. “No. No! I would never do that,” he says. “When I’m writing, I get a line. I write that line down because it sounds beautiful to me, and then I follow that with other beautiful-sounding lines. And when that gets spent, I look at what I’ve written, and it doesn’t make any sense, so I have to ask that mess of text a bunch of questions: What are you about? You sound good, but you don’t make any sense.” Having started at a particular point, Brown hopes to arrive at a surprising end that transforms the original idea, like in his poem “The Tradition,” below, which appears in his Pulitzer Prize–winning 2019 poetry collection, The Tradition (Copper Canyon Press). He says it takes an average of four years for a poem to crystallize.

Doing the work has given Brown a deeper understanding of the world—and himself. “I grew up thinking and being told there was something wrong with me—being gay, an artist, Black—and that my job was to fix or get rid of that thing. But poems will teach you a certain logic if you read and write them enough. And I now know that there is nothing wrong with me.”

“The Tradition”

Aster. Nasturtium. Delphinium. We thought

Fingers in dirt meant it was our dirt, learning

Names in heat, in elements classical

Philosophers said could change us. Stargazer.

Foxglove. Summer seemed to bloom against the will

Of the sun, which news reports claimed flamed hotter

On this planet than when our dead fathers

Wiped sweat from their necks. Cosmos. Baby’s Breath.

Men like me and my brothers filmed what we

Planted for proof we existed before

Too late, sped the video to see blossoms

Brought in seconds, colors you expect in poems

Where the world ends, everything cut down.

John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.

A Tale of Two Viruses

Jericho Brown walks us through two poems that approach HIV in different ways.

HIV appears in various contexts in Jericho Brown's Pulitzer Prize–winning 2019 poetry collection, The Tradition (Copper Canyon Press). In "The Virus," Brown personifies HIV by giving it a taunting and destructive voice. "That poem," he tells POZ, "is ultimately about how I could not allow myself to feel joy even at the sight of something beautiful in the natural world." When you're under the impression that you're going to die or always be alienated, he says, no matter what you do to find joy—from watching The Golden Girls to making love—it will be tarnished by your thoughts of HIV.

"Cakewalk," which appears later in The Tradition and represents Brown's more recent attitude toward HIV, is lighter and playful. "I was trying to write a sweet poem without being sentimental," Brown says. "And I thought you could have two lovers walking, and they're making fun of each other's HIV. One man could say to the other, 'My HIV is better than yours'—which is automatically funny but also strange. The poem shows that a smile can also coexist alongside HIV."

"The Virus"

Dubbed undetectable, I can't kill

The people you touch, and I can't

Blur your view

Of the pansies you've planted

Outside the window, meaning

I can't kill the pansies, but I want to.

I want them dying, and I want

To do the killing. I want you

To heed that I'm still here

Just beneath your skin and in

Each organ

The way anger dwells in a man

Who studies the history of his nation.

If I can't leave you

Dead, I'll have

You vexed. Look. Look

Again: show me the color

Of your flowers now.

“Cakewalk”

My man swears his HIV is better than mine, that his has in it a little gold, something he can spend if he ever gets old, claims mine is full of lead: slows you down, he tells me, looking over his shoulder. But I keep my eyes on his behind, say my HIV is just fine. Practical. Like pennies. Like copper. It can conduct electricity. Keep the heat on or shock you. It works hard, earns as much as my smile.

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