

listenN: Today in episode one, I'm going to be talking with Susana Molinolo, a poetic writer and crafter of words. Born in Santa Fe, Argentina, now living in Toronto, Canada, Susana's words have always struck a very deep note with me. As somebody who had an extremely difficult education just trying to master the words of one language, I'm fascinated to learn how she became so skilled at crafting the perfect words in a language that wasn't her native tongue. Hey, Susana. Welcome to listenN.

Susana: Thank you, Brian. It's an honor to be your first guest.

listenN: That's great. I've always wanted to talk to you about the constructing of words that you use in your poetry, and so the first question I have for you is when did you actually realize that you loved words?

Susana: I mean, I started reading at a very early age and I think that's when I realized the magic of it. You just read one story and it takes you to a world that you can't even imagine. Then you just become addicted, going world to world inside of literature. Actually, that's a really good question. I can't think of when I realized that I needed to do that in the sense of you don't wake up one day, at least it wasn't for me. I didn't wake up one day and really think, "I'm going to be a writer." I think it just started spilling out of me and then I think, "What is this?" And then I would jot it down and it'd be a sentence here, a sentence there, and then one day you realize you're writing poetry.

listenN: You told me a story about the word Wednesday once.

Susana: Well, to be honest with you, it's quite fuzzy because it would've happened probably the first or second week of Kindergarten, which takes me back over 40 years ago. The teacher had asked us to bring in an item of a certain color for every day of the week, so let's say Monday would've been blue and Tuesday would've been yellow. My memory is of Wednesday, and Wednesday was green. And so my association of words with colors, words with sounds, words with smells started way back then. Even though I didn't start writing poetry until I was in high school, I have associated words with colors, words with emotions, words with sense and sounds that not everybody hears. I think I started that connection in my brain over 40 years ago.

listenN: I know that some people will hear music in color, or they'll hear sounds in color and that sort of thing, so you're talking about words and color. When you're crafting the perfect words together, do you think of them as words or do you see them as something else?

Susana: They are feelings to me. A simple word like "path" doesn't really evoke a feeling, but you put an adjective in front of it, or you give the word "path" some personification, and yeah. They come alive, I would say, more as a feeling for me and in trying to recreate something that I've experienced and I want to share with a reader about mostly the wonder of nature, which is my current obsession.

listenN: So describe that when you say your current obsession. What do you mean by that?

Susana: Several years ago, I started really appreciating what walking did for me. I mean, it was my main mode of transportation and I would do it to blow off steam and I would do it if I was on deadline and I couldn't come up with a hook for the start of an article. So yeah, I did it mostly as stress relief, but the more time I procrastinated in nature, I started seeing everything with new eyes, so a leaf on a rose bush wasn't just a green leaf. It was like it was talking to me and the way the light hit a bunch of dew on early morning grass. I just started feeling like the universe was trying to tell me something, so I just would go out and listen more attentively, look more attentively, and I have not stopped looking and listening. I feel that the more I spend time in nature, the more it is showing me what my gifts are. Just like it has its own gifts, I feel like nature's teaching me what some of my gifts are.

listenN: I mentioned in the introduction that you were born in Santa Fe, Argentina, which means that you were born into the Spanish language. How was the transition to English for you and the understanding of the magic of English words, and did that have any impact on your evolution as a writer?

Susana: I think it had a huge impact, but at the time of ... Well, my parents basically left Argentina, went to The States, went back to Argentina, so for a very long time there was a back-and-forth that was causing a lot of friction for me, where when we left Argentina, I was yanked away from my mother language and forced to learn English. The next thing you know, they would take me back to Argentina, and then I'd have to forget the English to make room for Spanish again. For many, many years this went on, and it really difficult. I mean, you don't have a grasp of your mother tongue, and you're trying to incorporate a new language that doesn't sound anything like the first one you were exposed to.

Susana: At some point, I have this image of me much, much later in life spending a lot of time with the dictionary and really trying to master the English language, which now I'm almost 50 and I realize nobody has mastered the English language because it's so beautiful and it's so complex and it's got so many other languages that it's adopted. I'd say that my formative years were not ... It wasn't a loving relationship with the language.

listenN: So what made you run towards it as opposed to run away from it? When somebody comes across difficulties in their life, they have a tendency to either avoid them or embrace them, so you obviously embraced it. Why?

Susana: That's a really good question. I would say that, at some point, I can throw my parents' divorce in there. There was a lot of things that were broken in our home. Finances, relationships, family bonds. Again, never feeling like I really fit in because I didn't really feel like I spoke Spanish well, and I didn't feel like I spoke English well. So the more things broke down around me family-wise, I needed shelter and I began a very obsessive period of my life where all I would do is lock myself in my room and read. The more I read, the more I was freed from a lot of those feelings that I couldn't change. I couldn't divorce my parents, while they were going through a divorce. You're stuck a lot as a child, and language and stories freed me.

listenN: Do you have a memory of some of those stories that you would say were your favorites or ones that moved you the most during that time?

Susana: I'd already had a very passionate relationship with reading, but the one story that always comes to mind is Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment. It's kind of funny with stories you love. I only read it maybe once or twice, but again, back to an earlier question you asked, the feelings I still hold from that book are very intense. I was mesmerized by the way that ... You know, and again, I can't really say Dostoevsky because I didn't read it in Russian. I read the English translation, so what the translator was able to do with the Russian to English was phenomenal because it's the story of a very poor student who becomes so desperate that he decides to kill a pawnbroker, an old, not very kind woman.

Susana: I don't think I'll ever be able to enter into the mental state of a person who would kill somebody else, but in that story, I embodied this student who had a reason and was so desperate to kill another human being, and I understood it. I'm not trying to justify what he did, but it's amazing that I was able to experience what it was like to kill somebody through a character in a work of fiction.

listenN: Was that the most powerful thing at that period in your life? Like to kill another human being is a pretty powerful emotion.

Susana: It wasn't just the killing itself. It was I can smell that room. After he kills the woman, he spends days and days on his ... I'm glorifying the sofa idea, but you can imagine impoverished student who has nothing to eat, who falls into a fever, so even the experience of that in and out kind of almost coma feeling you get when you've got a really high fever. It was just the intensity of that novel was just so vivid to me.

listenN: Is there a way that certain writers are able to use words differently than other writers in the sense of you're describing you could smell and you could taste? I mean, is that something that is unique to all writing or is it something that is crafted by a few?

Susana: Well, I mean it's definitely a craft and you definitely have to work on it. I'll give you an example of somebody who is not a novelist, but I still love her writing. It's the chef homemaker, Nigella Lawson. Is it Lawson or Watson? That's kind of funny.

listenN: Lawson.

Susana: Lawson. Nigella, because I only think of her in her first name. When you read the descriptions or the introductions to her recipes, you forget that you're reading a cookbook. She's funny. She's got amazing historical anecdotes. She's kind of flirty, and I love cookbooks and I skim a lot of cookbooks and magazines. There are very few people, maybe somebody like a Jamie Oliver can do it live and candid, but there's very few people that can do it like Nigella, so she is, again, I think worked extremely hard to do what she does, and she does it so beautifully. So yeah, I think it's a craft that's hard to master.

listenN: To me, it's seeing the importance of words. It's understanding that words matter.

Susana: They really have a lot of weight, so sometimes, especially with poetry because that's where my strengths lie, when I say "weight," I mean I'll literally carry a word around in my head and in my mouth for days. I mean, prior to showing up today, the word that popped into my head was "mud." And I just kept saying it over and over and over again, and it started evoking feelings and I could smell and I could feel falling into mud with boots on. So I'll weigh that word around for days on end. I'll write it out. Maybe I'll start writing a poem, and maybe into the third or fourth draft, mud won't even be a part of the poem anymore. It might just be in the title or it might've just been the word that brought me to this feeling, so they have importance in the sense that they open up worlds for you.

Susana: I mean, you look up a word in the dictionary. You look it up in three or four different dictionaries. They're all described differently, so it's just fascinating how each single word you use will evoke something different in a different person. As a writer, what I often do because of the way I came to the English language and my issues around learning is that I try to write in very simple ways that even if somebody only knows ... Maybe English is their third or fourth language, they'll be able to read my poem with ease and they won't feel uncomfortable and they won't have to reach for a dictionary. Words are definitely important, and I want to use them in a very inclusive way.

listenN: Are there any words in Spanish that you wish existed in English?

Susana: That's a good question. I can't think of one off the top of my head, but there's a lot of expressions. One of the funny ones that we laugh about at home is this expression called "Se me fue la mano." If I translate that for you it says, "My hand, it left me," or, "My hand, it went." And you use that expression when, a lot of the times around cooking when you say, "I put too much salt in something." So if I say that, it's over-seasoned or over-salted. When I hear those things in English, they kind of bore me. But when I hear it in Spanish, it just fills me with this sense of, "Yes, that's exactly what happened. In the moment of cooking, my hand just did a little bit too much of what it was doing." So I can't say there's a word in particular, but that phrase really evokes something important for me.

listenN: Do you think that the understanding of the Spanish language, the Latin language around those types of phrases, because what you described in English about "it's over-salted" or "I put too much salt in" or "I over-seasoned it" or "I messed up," they're very sort of hard.

Susana: Yeah.

listenN: Whereas in the Spanish version, it's that magic. Of what really happened.

Susana: Yeah.

- listenN: In your poetry, is that something that you're always trying to do with the English words is give them a little bit of life that feels magical?
- Susana: What I'm trying to do is almost like what nature has been teaching me, which is to look beyond what the eye sees. I try to write poetry in that same way. For example, this morning I worked on a poem. I just called it Poem Number Five, and it was inspired by a snowy walk yesterday. There was something about twigs, and I kind of really like that word, so I wanted to use it in the poem. Plus, it was something that was very prominent on the walk yesterday. I had to figure out a way to take somebody to that path with me and not just visualize a long, snowy path. I had to bring in sound. Luckily, on the walk, I picked up a little branch and this morning, I was contemplating, is it "twig" I want to use because, really, I love that word, or do I have to be honest about what happened in that moment? Am I going to talk about the branch?
- Susana: In the end, I realized that I needed twigs because they would litter the path the way they did naturally, and the sound of crunching under the boot wouldn't have happened if there hadn't been twigs. The magic is how can you take somebody to some moment in your life that was magical for you, even though it was so ordinary? Right? Just to walk on a path is very ordinary, so my job or task, or my goal is to make the reader just stop and pause, take them out of their day-to-day problems and concerns like we all have, and for those 30, 50, 70 lines they're reading, they're holding my hand and they're trusting me to lead them and allow them to pause out of life's confusion, really.
- listenN: Nice. When you talk about taking those moments, those everyday moments and injecting something into them. I don't know what that is that you inject, but you inject something into them that makes them become meaningful to another human being. Is that what the challenge is with poetry? Is that what the challenge is with your writing of trying to combine the words? Because this whole conversation was based around something you said to me once, which is, "I'm searching for the perfect word." And weeks went on while you were writing something that you were searching for the perfect word. Well, what is that?
- Susana: I guess I seem to equate a lot of things back to cooking, so it's like creating a marinade or a salad dressing where if I make a dressing for you right now and you pour it over your salad in the next 10 minutes, I mean, it'll taste fine. But if we let that salad dressing sit for a day, it's going to taste that much better. If there was crushed garlic in it or something fresh, like lemon zest or freshly ripped basil leaves, by day three, all of those things will have combined and there's an alchemy to it that is very similar to what happens for me around words where I'm trying to reach back in my memory about the moment. I'm trying to make sure that the word isn't just a word that I'm obsessed with. It has to be a word that I know will ring true almost, or connect with the reader.
- Susana: For example, I wrote a poem a couple years ago called The Naaz, and it took me a month to write the poem and it's about an old movie theater in Little India in Toronto, and the movie theater's not there anymore, but it was the history of what that movie theater, by having been placed there, created for the neighborhood. So I would walk into Little India in the morning, in the afternoon, at dusk, in the rain, and I would see it

from different light. I would see it from different movement, and one afternoon, I saw the sun in a way that I'd never seen it there before. It was very muted, it was very fuzzy.

Susana: When I went to write the poem, I said something to the effect of how the sun looked with all its lips. To this day, if anybody's read the poem, they'll tell me that that was one of their favorite parts of the poem, and they almost can't explain why, but they connect to the fact that we often give the moon personification, smiling, winking at you, but the sun is fiery. The sun is that much further away. The sun is untouchable. Just with two words, I was able to take the sun as something that they could relate to.

listenN: What does that feel like when you've done that, when somebody echoes back to you what you've done?

Susana: It's a good moment, but you realize how hard it is. As I said, it took me about a month to write the poem. I'm still not happy with a lot of the parts of it because there were parts that I really did love, like that one in particular. To recreate that type of magic over and over again can almost be like a paralysis. If I were going to try to do that with every single word, it would almost be like treating the poem in such a precious way that it wouldn't be real. Even if you read it, you would think, "Oh, she's trying a little bit too hard." It's wonderful when it happens, and you almost feel it when it's happening. Either you type, I don't type my poems out first. I write everything by hand. But as soon as it comes out of your body, it's pretty magical because it's like something finally dislodging from you and it just feels right.

listenN: So if you were to say to somebody who's, let's say, just starting on a journey of wanting to be a writer or wanting to be a poet, do you have little tips or exercises or things that you've done that you find work that are maybe unique to you that aren't written in every other "how to be a writer" book kind of thing?

Susana: Well, I credit a lot of this observation period that I'm going through to Anne Lamott, who wrote the book *Bird by Bird*. One of her tips was, essentially, you have cue cards, every single time you go out for a walk. You have them next to your bed, you have them in the bathroom, you have them in your purse. You never allow a word to escape because once you turn on that faucet for yourself in which you say, "I'm committing to the writing," the muses start showing up. But they show up when you least expect it. They show up in the shower. They show up when you're driving. They show up when you're having a conversation with the cashier at a grocery store.

Susana: If you tell the universe that you're going to start creating, honor that wish. I would just say always have something to write it down with. And, I don't know, maybe I'm old school, but I do really believe in the power of writing things out. I'm not saying I don't do it on my phone in emergency situations. I've been known to just stop walking on the side walk, record in my phone or type out a little note, but most of the stuff that turns into poetry and that feels good for me has been hand-written.

listenN: Nice.

- Susana: I'm trying to think of all the people that have been very encouraging to me and kind to me, and if I were to mentor a person who was starting to write, I think that it's a lot of what I just shared, which is writing's not about that image we have of people sitting in front of a computer or an old fashioned typewriter and having the favorite slippers. I mean, those good luck charms work for some people and everybody gets into that creation mode in whichever way they can, and I respect them for it.
- Susana: But most of the people that I admire really just figure out how to create no matter where they are, so I would say to the new writer, don't beat yourself up and sit in front of a computer for days on end because it's likely that not much is going to happen, so just go out for a walk. Drive your kids to school. Help the neighbor. Rake the garden. That's where the ideas are going to come, and that's where your stories are going to be born, so don't ever set yourself up for failure by just staring at a white screen or the white paper because a lot of the magic isn't there.
- listenN: Yeah. It's don't limit yourself to the blank page kind of thing. Let the blank page fill itself with what you experience outside of staring at it.
- Susana: Yeah, exactly.
- listenN: If you can just tell me some of the words that you think are just really interesting words.
- Susana: One of the words I think about a lot but I can't write about it because it just doesn't fit most of the things is the word "periwinkle." I love the color. I love the way it sounds. It actually, just even now, I want to laugh just saying it out loud. Another word that fascinates me, and the other day in the shower I was thinking, "Maybe I should get this word tattooed somewhere," is the word "condone." This is the word that has stumped me my whole life. I can't tell you how many times I've looked it up in the dictionary. To this day, I hear somebody use the word or I hear it on the news or I read it, and I start to sweat because I do not know, even hearing it in the context, if that means you support or encourage that behavior or you don't.
- Susana: That's where I play this game in Spanish because "condone" I break up as "con," which means with, and "done," which doesn't really translate to anything. But yeah, it's one of those words which will always stump me and I think it's like ... You know how we all have that little ... We like to have those little things that are peculiar to us. I think that's one of those that I'm almost addicted to having. So periwinkle, condone. There's so many. I can't think of any more right now.
- listenN: I'm going to get you to read your poem, The Naaz, because I think that it would be great for people to hear that and see the magic that you create when you combine your words. Who are some of the poets that you read, that you admire, that you would want to share?
- Susana: I have two collections that I am currently obsessed with. I carry them in my purse, and if I'm changing from my purse to my backpack, they come along. One is a collection by an American poet. Her name is Ellen Bass. She's written many collections. I don't know that

much about her. I know she's a professor of poetry. She's asked to do lectures and workshops around the country, if not internationally. The collection is called Like a Beggar. There are quite a few poems that I can reread all day long, so I'll read you one, if not two from that collection. And there's a collection from a Toronto-based playwright/poet. Her name is Shannon Bramer and I don't know her personally, but a woman in my writer's collective recommended it to one of the woman in the collective. Then that woman hasn't stopped talking about it, so I was finally curious to pick up the collection. The woman that recommended it to me is a mother of four and she said, even as a parent, even if you weren't poet, you would appreciate her work. So I'll read you one of Shannon's poems as well.

Susana: Restaurant by Ellen Bass. "Before she told me, she let me finish my dinner. I can still see the pinkish cream sauce blossoming on the china. I didn't know yet if I could walk when I pushed myself back from the table. This is what gets me. I didn't throw the stained dish against the wall. I slipped the plastic from my wallet. I signed my name. No matter what we're up against, no matter who just shot up an overdose, or broke his spine at the fifth cervical, no matter that a child's in prison or turning tricks in another city, very few people are dropping to all fours and baying at the empty white plates. How can you not love the human animal? In every restaurant in Fresno, California, the diner's are opening their cloth or paper napkins. They spear a chunk of potato and find, as they always did, the opening to their mouth. They chew and they swallow. They sip the icy water."

listenN: Wow. That was really beautiful. I was right there in the restaurant, and I think it's great because you were talking earlier about your love for recipes, food and ingredients. There's that mixed with humanity and life, and I just felt so connected to her words. Thanks for sharing that.

Susana: Well, it's my guilty pleasure. I've been reading that poem for at least once a week for almost a year. I love that poem. It's so crystal clear. It's like a tiny, little screenplay. I've had many experiences that are intense like that, and to be honest, I've never put them down on paper because they're just too ... I can't deal with them. So when I read that poem, I thought, "What eloquence. What sheer insight into human pain and understanding how to express that." I just love it from beginning to end, and that part about despite everything, she can still pull out a credit card and be civil no matter what she's just learned.

Susana: White Paper Birds by Shannon Bramer. "Sometimes you have to breastfeed your kid even when you don't feel like breastfeeding your kid. Near the end of her feed she pulls off to look at you with her round eyes and you don't look away. Sometimes you have to sing your kid to sleep even when you don't feel up to any song. When you put her down she cries, she always cries. You pick her up when you are a piece of glass. You kiss her and kiss her and pick her up and put her down and kiss her again like a wolf. You are a real mother. You don't kick or break any toys on purpose. And you don't scream and you don't weep. Your baby grows. You've got a shiny red shovel for all your shitty feelings. You've got a daughter with a broken lip where she's been biting down. The house is full of nests. Tiny piles of torn newsprint, a million crumpled swans swimming down the stairs. Another life folded inside each paper bird."

- listenN: I really enjoyed the way she used her words to describe something that's so common to everybody, which is being a mother or being a parent and having to deal with a child, and the way she just brought in the words around the "red shovel for all your shitty feelings" just took me right back to what it was like when I had small children.
- Susana: Yeah, that poem is exceptional. It's like a painting of domestic life with children, and domestic life with children is sticky, it's messy, clocks are turned inside out, and often you feel feral. That line that transitions from kissing a child and kissing the child over and over, to it being a kiss like a wolf just blew me away. I mean, she just really got to the core of what it feels like when you're exhausted and you're in love with this child, but you're also enraged with this child. It's a phenomenal poem.
- Susana: My poem, The Naaz, won the "What's Your Story?" Competition in 2017. The Naaz. "In some Canadian towns, the liquor store is called the drug store, the co-op's called the supermarket. Here, there once was a cinema called The Naaz. On blazing summer nights and cold blue evenings, bulging golden lines wrapped around the block. Sometimes red carpets were laid for the Bollywood stars. The neighborhood smelled like bones growing, mud and flux, the scent of former clay mines and smokey sandalwood learning to acquiesce. The Naaz was like a giant elm sprouting shiny new shops every week: cold drink houses, buffet restaurants up and down the street.
- Susana: "Punjabi Chaat Palace, Ashok Jewelers, cardamom and kaftans for sale! The mannequins at the emporium dressed in cinnamon sarees ready for any occasion. A cornucopia of sounds! Chants of Falooda! Kulfi! Kashmiri tea! Sultry silver music splashing out of tiny speakers and the constant rusty rumblings of the streetcar. The movie theater's now gone, but then, like now, nibbled burnt barbecue cobs litter the sidewalks and the afternoon is sometimes large, orange, the curious sun watching us with all its lips. Behind the dirty shop windows rattling curiosities: stacks of roti makers, coconut scrapers and enough carrom coins for the entire world.
- Susana: "The pastel desserts at the mini market have low-gleam, from the sidewalk they're like derelicts. Hydro poles rainbowed with posters: Islamic poetry festival, lost dogs, affordable guitar lessons. All day a kaleidoscope of events. Whirling visions like in dreams: graffiti rose alleyways, some familiar faces, and so many pigeons that maybe you'll start to fly. At night, there's glowing trees, electric aroma of fires and bubblegum giggles. The modern merchants breathe in metamorphosis. Tonight, the sandwich boards say the art studio is a pay-what-you-can yoga class and the café is packed, no coffee in sight, just faces bathed with laughter. Then, like now, the library is full. Tiny sticky fingers, starchy eyes and readers still trying to map their way up to the moon."
- listenN: I can totally understand why that won, especially an award called "What's Your Story?" because this just brings to life the story of this movie theater. And I just love the way you describe "in certain towns, the liquor store is called the co-op" because I've been in those towns and I've seen that, and you just take me there in such a beautiful way. Thank you so much for sharing that with us, Susana.
- Susana: Oh, it was my pleasure. Thank you for asking me to read it.

listenN: It's been a real pleasure chatting with you and learning about your process and a bit about your history and how you struggled in the early part and managed to run into language as opposed to away from it, so we're grateful for that. So thank you for having the courage to do that, and thanks for being on listenN.

Susana: Well, thank you so much for inviting me. I know you'll have a lot more exciting people on here, like maybe comics or people that'll make you laugh a little. So thank you for taking a chance on a poet.

listenN: Okay. You're welcome. Bye.

Susana: Bye.

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