

Ada Limón makes poems for a living



Poet Ada Limón, now touring for her sixth book, at home in Lexington, Ky., May 4, 2022. The former theater major gets a charge out of performing, and earns much of her income by giving frequent readings and hosting a poetry podcast called “The Slowdown,” in which she shares the work of other poets. Carla Ciuffo/The New York Times.

by Elizabeth A. Harris

NEW YORK, NY.- Ada Limón is a professional poet: She does not support herself with a teaching position, has no day job or independent wealth. She is a poet who makes a living off her poetry.

She recognizes this makes her something of a unicorn.

“If you tell people you’re a poet, people think you’re off your rocker,” she said. At certain points in her life, “it felt like telling someone I was a witch or something.”

She manages this career, in part, by embracing poetry as a form that is meant to be not just quietly read but also performed aloud. A former theater major who gets a charge out of performing, she earns much of her income by giving frequent readings and hosting a poetry podcast called “The Slowdown,” in which she shares the work of other poets.

She also reads aloud as she writes.

“I could never be a writer who works in coffee shops, because I have to read a lot,” she said. “I say it out loud and then I say it again and again. If someone heard it, they’d be like, ‘I am so sick of this poem!’”

She is now on tour for her sixth book, “The Hurting Kind,” which draws on details of the natural world, often to illuminate the complexities of family, memory and longing.

Limón, 46, lives in Lexington, Kentucky, with her husband, Lucas Marquardt; their pug, Lily Bean; and a cat named Olive. (The cat is so ancient, Limón says, that when she wanders past during a Zoom call, people sometimes ask, “Is that cat OK?”)

Limón, who is funny on social media and in her poems, is a riot in person. Marquardt said she is funniest when at home, just sitting on the couch. “The conversations she has with the dog, or in the dog’s voice, are golden,” he said.

Limón used to have a more traditional job. Born and raised in Northern California, she came to New York City to get her Master of Fine Arts in poetry at New York University and stayed, taking a position in the marketing department of Condé Nast, which publishes magazines such as Vogue, Vanity Fair and The New Yorker.

A few years into her magazine career, and in a new job at Travel & Leisure magazine, she and a co-worker wrote an advertising campaign encouraging people to take more trips. The slogan, which ran on top of New York City taxicabs, said, “Please go away.” At one point, she recalled with a laugh, her ads seemed to be just as prolific on taxis as ads for FlashDancers Gentlemen’s Club. She rose to become the creative service director of the magazine, managing a team of about 20 people.

She published three books while living and working in New York City, and her immediate colleagues were very supportive, toasting her first poem in *The New Yorker* with Champagne. Although she was finding success as a poet, she still dedicated most of her time to her magazine jobs.

Then, in 2010, Limón's stepmother died of colon cancer at age 51. The loss made her ask, if she only had 20 years left, what would she want to do with her time?

The answer, she found, was to become a full-time writer. She gave up her career in marketing, took her savings and moved — first to Northern California, then to Kentucky, to join Marquardt, who was then her boyfriend.

“My neighbors are much more interested in how my backyard trees are doing or if I've seen the fox, or whether anything blew over in the windstorm last night,” she said, “than if I have a poem in *The New Yorker*.”

She had assumed that writing full time would mean writing fiction, she said. She'd spend most of her days pretending to be other people, and then she'd write poems that allowed her to be herself. In the process, she said, she was more tender and vulnerable than she'd been in her poetry before.

"*Bright Dead Things*," the first book she wrote after leaving New York, was born of a failed novel, she said, and that was the book that really started to change things for Limón. A finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, it has now sold more than 40,000 copies.

It sold to her publisher, Milkweed Editions, for \$500, she said.

Her next book, “*The Carrying*,” was an improvement, she said. “I was actually able to buy my car. It was used, but I was able to buy a Mazda hatchback, and it was from my book money.”

“*The Carrying*” is perhaps her most personal and unguarded collection, touching on aging parents and chronic pain. (Limón has scoliosis.) She also writes about infertility.

“I am very much myself on the page, and I like that about my work,” Limón said. “But in so doing, sometimes people think that they know me intimately.” On occasion, she said, she'll be talking to a person for five minutes before she realizes they've never met.

Now, both writing and performing are vital to her work, she said, and she is always thinking about the musicality of the words as she writes. But the woman who shows up onstage is “utterly antithetical” to the poet who dreams up the work.

“My poet self is super spacey, can’t hold a conversation,” she said, laughing. “That is the person who’s wandering off and saying, ‘Oh, how long have I been in the backyard? I’ve been watching the birds for three hours.’”

When she turns on the performer, however, “I get there five minutes early, I make sure that I eat something,” she said. “I bring my Type A.”

In her most recent book, she said, she was interested in things that can go on without her — the book has four sections, each named for a season.

The collection is dedicated to her stepfather, Brady T. Brady, who is one of her early readers, along with a small group of poets including Jennifer L. Knox and Matthew Zapruder. Brady went from high school to fighting in the infantry in Vietnam and never studied poetry. But his guidance of her writing has been valuable since she was a child, Limón said. Once, when she was 15, she called him at work to read a poem she had written.

“I started reading it in this very poetic voice, and he was like: ‘Wait, no,’” she said. “‘Just read it to me like you’re telling me something.’ And I read it that way, in my natural voice, and then he could hear it.

“That really has stuck with me. I love to perform, and all that stuff is great — but remember that it’s also just telling somebody something.”

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