

Matter 17

Summary

Seat in the Gods

Account by:	Love Ellis, 27. Poet.
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Report

Interviewer: Celia St Paul (CS).

Interviewee: Love Ellis (LE).

CS: So for my next guest, I'm delighted to welcome the poet, Love Ellis whose second collection, *In the Name of Love*, has just been published. Love, welcome to *Seat in the Gods*!

LE: Thank you for inviting me.

CS: The pleasure is all mine, I assure you. After the success of your first collection, *This, er, This* –

LE: *This Thing Called Love*.

Dheghōm

CS: Yes, sorry, I was just collecting my notes, yes, so, after the success of *This Thing Called Love*, I'm sure you received many invitations for interviews.

LE: A few.

CS: Yet this is your first broadcast interview.

LE: It is.

CS: So I can't help wondering why you chose to speak to *Seat in the Gods* rather than, say, Radio 4's *Front Row*?

LE: Leaving aside the fact that I wasn't invited to speak on *Front Row* –

CS: (laughs)

LE: – I liked your podcast's name.

CS: Simple as that?

LE: Simple as that.

CS: OK, well obviously we've exchanged a few emails in the run-up, but this is the first time we've had a chance to speak properly, albeit over Zoom.

LE: At least we don't have to wear masks this way.

CS: Indeed, indeed.

LE: Although everyone wears masks of one kind or another, don't they?

CS: Er, quite. Anyway, for the benefit of our listeners, not all of whom may be familiar with your work, perhaps you'd like to say a little about yourself?

LE: Well, I'm Love Ellis, I'm 27, 28 next week, I live in leafy Oxfordshire and I don't really have a job.

Matter 17

INL

CS: You're a poet, though.

LE: That's true.

CS: Have you always been a poet?

LE: Everyone has always been a poet.

CS: Can you explain what you mean by that?

LE: You are who you are. It's just a question of how long it takes you to find out.

CS: I, er, see, I see. So, Love (giggles) – oh I'm so sorry! When I say that I keep thinking I'm talking to my husband!

LE: It happens a lot, don't worry. I'm inured to it.

CS: Love is your real name, though?

LE: It is. I have an artist for a mother: this is the kind of thing that happens.

CS: Oh, I know – my mother is an artist and she lumbered me with Celia!

LE: It's heavenly.

CS: You like it? I think it's a bit old-fashioned myself.

LE: No – I mean I do like it, but it's ultimately from the Latin word *caelum*, meaning 'Heaven'. That's why I said it was heavenly.

CS: Oh, I see!

LE: I'd thought it was one of the reasons you called your podcast *Seat in the Gods*.

CS: No, I chose it because 'the gods' is what –

LE: I know: the upper balconies in a theatre. It's a clever name –

CS: Well for an arts podcast, everyone sits in the cheapest seats!

Dheghōm

LE: I wasn't about to suggest that –

CS: You're too polite.

LE: – no, I thought it was clever because it promises a long view.

CS: Oh, er, that too of course! Anyway, Love (giggles), so you first burst brilliantly onto the scene with your collection *This Thing Called Love*.

LE: So I'm told.

CS: Now this was widely seen as having a theme of identity.

(pause)

Er, so was it about identity?

LE: It was about whatever you want it to be about. I only write the poems; it's for others to interpret them.

CS: So if I wanted to read, say, your poem *Flight* as if it was about, oh, say, the mechanics of a car, that would be acceptable?

LE: Of course. If you were fleeing from a car mechanic, even more so.

CS: Er...

LE: The essence of art – all art, not just poetry – is that it says something. As for what it says, well it says itself: the artwork is the expression and the expression is the artwork. They're one and the same.

CS: I'm not sure I follow.

LE: I can't tell you what the poem *Flight* is about. Well, I *can* tell you, but my explanation would be the poem itself. I reduced – condensed –

Matter 17

INL

what I wanted to say in that poem *into* that poem. You have to read the poem to find meaning in it.

CS: The title is a pun, though, right?

LE: Is it?

CS: Well I thought it was about both flying and fleeing. The past participle of both 'to fly' and 'to flee' is 'flight'.

LE: It can also be a noun. A flight of stairs. A flight of swans. A helicopter flight. A wine flight.

CS: A wine flight?

LE: It's a collection of wines at a wine-tasting event. The point I'm trying to make is that the word 'flight' has many meanings, as do all words. The key to understanding poetry is to find the meaning that works for you.

CS: I see, I see. Now one of the things about your poetry – in both your collections – is that it's orthogonal to many of the present trends in British poetry.

LE: Each to their own.

CS: Be that as it may, most modern poetry has eschewed rhyme entirely, yet in your work you mix older forms and experimental forms of your own.

LE: So?

CS: Well, why haven't you abandoned the old-fashioned ways like everyone else?

LE: They haven't abandoned them, they just wield them differently. Rhyme is one of a range of tools available to them.

CS: And also to you?

Dheghōm

LE: And also to me, yes, I use the same tools that everyone else uses.

CS: Yet you have an emphasis on rhyme and metre that others don't. George the Poet, for example –

LE: I'm familiar with his work, of course I am. Look, if you're hoping that I'm going to criticise someone else for following their own path, you can hope away: I shan't be taking that bait.

CS: OK, OK, so can you tell us what's so important about rhyme and structure to you that you put such an emphasis on them?

LE: Sure. I started out as a songwriter – not a very good one, I didn't like what I found myself saying.

CS: Saying?

LE: Yes – the message, I mean, not the words. It was too easy to be sloppy in libretti, too easy to be pretentious in rap. Neither of those are me. I liked the structure afforded by music, but was drawn to rhyme because it presents the listener with a way to anticipate what's coming. For me, poetry is a playful process. I choose rules to focus my statements, because otherwise I'd have too much to say. If I subsequently broke those rules because I couldn't keep to them, why would I even have them? Or if I made them so slack that meaning came from superficial, serendipitous connections? Play is free movement within a rigid system: too much rigidity and there's no movement; too little and there's no system. Either way, there's no play.

Matter 17

INL

CS: You seem to be criticising those who don't follow rules.

LE: Not at all. I'm me, they're them; they follow different rules peculiar to their processes. They might use epistrophe and anaphora as their basis then insert one exquisite end-rhyme to skewer the listener; I might do it the other way round. It's a question of emphasis.

CS: So it's not because you can't write in the modern form, it's that you choose not to because you need more structure.

LE: Not more: different. The affordances I associate with assonance and alliteration are shaped for shrouded shadows that show shallow shimmers. See? Easy – but I don't want easy.

CS: But ... that was actually quite thought-provoking. Shrouded shadows, shallow shimmers: you seemed to be saying something that surpasses what the words say alone.

LE: (laughs)

CS: Sorry?

LE: Oh, weren't you joining in? With the sibilance?

CS: (laughs) So I was! (laughs) My subconscious is a better poet than I am!

LE: (laughs)

CS: Now, what's next, ah, yes: I wonder if you'd like to read one of your poems from your new collection for our listeners?

LE: Of course, which one?

Dheghōm

CS: How about *Generous to a Fault*? It's nice and podcast-friendly short.

LE: OK.

CS: Before you start, can you perhaps tell us a little bit about it? You chose to write it in iambic tetrameter, rather than the more usual iambic pentameter, which –

LE: No, that's wrong.

CS: Sorry?

LE: It's trochaic, not iambic. Iambic puts the stress on the second syllable, "Come live with me and be my love" –

CS: That's Marlowe, isn't it?

LE: Yes, but you see how it stresses every even-numbered syllable? *Generous to a Fault* is trochaic, like Shakespeare's "Double, double, toil and trouble" couplet. It stresses every odd-numbered syllable.

CS: Ah, I apologise – I must have slept through that lecture in college. The question remains, though: why this particular form?

LE: That's its form.

CS: Yes, but *why* is it its form?

LE: Because it is its form. That's how it had to be.

CS: How it had to be so that what?

LE: No, just how it had to *be*.

CS: Ah. Well perhaps if you were to read the poem to us now, it'll become clearer.

LE: OK.

Generous to a Fault

Understand, I can't repay it:
What I've borrowed outlives owing.
Reparations won't decay it,
Day by day my debt is growing.
If my younger self could weigh it,
She would want what she's bestowing.

I want what I'll be tomorrow:
She whose life I'm guaranteeing;
She whose self is hers to borrow;
She whose character I'm freeing.
Love and life and storm and sorrow:
Who I am encodes my being.
(pause)

CS: Well, thank you, Love, that was quite an extraordinary reading. I read it earlier myself, but it sounded quite different in my head; it was less ... impactful.

LE: We have different heads.

CS: So it's about what your past self is paying forward to your future self?

LE: If that's what it's about to you, yes.

CS: What's it about to you?

LE: I've just told you what it's about. I read the poem. That's what it's about.

CS: (laughs) Enigmatic as ever!

LE: OK, let me try to elucidate. So, you've just used the word 'enigmatic'. It means something to you, and although you can dance around that meaning, explaining it using different words, that's

Dheghōm

not going to capture quite what you meant when you said it. The reading distances itself from the text. What you meant by 'enigmatic' is that very word itself: 'enigmatic'. Now I heard the word, and I interpreted it as meaning something, and even if it's close to what you meant, it's not *exactly* what you meant, and never can be. It encoded one of your thoughts and I decoded it into one of mine. It's the same deal with the poem. It's as if it was a very long word.

CS: Like in German?

LE: (laughs) Not quite *that* long!

CS: (laughs) OK, so, er, yes, so, moving on, your new collection: *In the Name of Love*. That's autobiographical like *This Thing Called Love*, yes?

LE: In the sense that all art articulates the self, yes.

CS: Your name is in the title, though.

LE: That doesn't mean it's a central theme.

CS: Nevertheless, it does seem to be saying that you now accept, or at least are reconciled with, who you are.

LE: If you say so.

CS: Well what else can it mean?

LE: Stop.

CS: Sorry?

LE: Well, if you wanted to interpret *This Thing Called Love* as self-indulgent navel-gazing, it could mean that I wanted to stop with that.

CS: It could? How?

Matter 17

INL

LE: The Supremes: (sings) Stop! In the name of love, before you break my heart. Think it o-o-ver.

CS: (laughs) Oh, I see! (laughs) Reading poetry is a bit like doing a cryptic crossword.

LE: I'm hopeless at those, I see too many words and can never decide which is the right one.

CS: The cover of your book is a bit strange.

LE: You were going to say 'enigmatic', weren't you?

CS: (laughs) Maybe! So, for the benefit of our listeners, the cover is off-white, the title, *In the Name of Love*, is in – what typeface is that?

LE: DIN 1451.

CS: (mutters) I should stop asking off-the-cuff questions....

LE: DIN stands for *Deutsches Institut für Normung*. DIN 1451 is used for road signs in Germany.

CS: (laughs) Is there nothing you don't know?

LE: (laughs) It took me two full days to choose that font – I was as surprised as anyone to find out where it originated.

CS: So what about this large symbol underneath the title, before your name?

LE: That says 'Love'.

CS: It does? I've looked at it every which way but I can't made head nor tail of it. It's like H.T upside-down.

LE: No no no, that upside-down T is an L. The vertical line with a dot to the left of it is the vowel

Dheghōm

sound. The Plus with a short crossbar in the middle is a V.

CS: I'm not seeing it.

LE: It's three separate letters written together, cursive style. The first letter is a vertical line with a horizontal line at the bottom that's about the same length as the vertical bar.

CS: So that's the upside-down T?

LE: Yes, the 'l'. The next letter is a vertical bar with a dot at the top to the left. That's the 'u' sound in 'Love'.

CS: A side-dotted I is a U?

LE: A vertical bar with something to the left is a vowel. The height shows how closed the vowel is, and the length of the line is how near to the front of the mouth it is. If it had been a long line instead of a dot, that would have made it an 'i' sound, like in the word 'sit'. If there had been two vertical lines next to one another, it would have been a long vowel, 'seat', 'move'.

CS: Ah, so the plus is a V? There's not an E at the end, it's just three letters?

LE: Correct, it's phonetic. The line crossing the vertical is only half-length because if you order by where sounds are formed in the mouth, it's in the middle. A long line would have been a 'th', as in 'that', and two dots either side would have been an 'h', as in 'hat'. If the line had been to the left instead of the middle, it would have been the same but unvoiced, so 'f' rather than 'v'.

Matter 17

INL

CS: Did you invent this code yourself? It must have taken ages.

LE: No, I didn't invent it. My father taught me it.

CS: The father you don't know?

LE: Yes, that one.

CS: Well, that was oddly educational! Did you study phonetics at college?

LE: No, my degree is in mathematics, I just find this kind of thing weirdly fascinating.

CS: Well I certainly wasn't expecting our conversation to cover the Supremes, wine flights, Latin names and cryptography, but I suppose that's the beauty of podcasts! Love Ellis, poet and genuinely interesting person, thank you for such an invigorating conversation. Your latest collection, *In the Name of Love*, is available where?

LE: Just look it up on Amazon. Get it while it's hot!

CS: Your previous collection, *This Thing Called Love*, that's there too?

LE: No, I withdrew it from sale. It's not hot any more.

CS: Oh! OK, well once more, thanks for speaking to us – Zoom managed to hold out for once!

LE: Thank you for inviting me.

Dheghōm

Notes

Ellis, L. (2021) *In the Name of Love*. London: Love Ellis.

This is the only media interview Love Ellis is known to have given.

In the Name of Love was removed from sale 5 Jun 2021, Love Ellis's 28th birthday.