

Jena Kirkpatrick

Austin, Texas

CECILY SAILER

Over the last two decades, poet-for-hire Jena Kirkpatrick has self-published eight books; co-written, directed, and produced three multimedia performance art pieces; and competed in two national slam poetry competitions. Kirkpatrick has toured nationwide with Trio of Poets. She leads multiple workshops for Badgerdog Literary Publishing, a writers-in-the-schools nonprofit based in Austin, Texas. When she's not scribbling away on random scraps of paper, she likes to rollerblade, kayak, hike, and practice yoga. On Saturdays, she can be found at Barton Creek Farmers Market writing "Poems on the Spot While You Shop" on her antique typewriter. This interview took place at Badgerdog Literary Publishing in the spring of 2011.

Cecily Sailer: When did you begin to sense that writing would be a big part of your life?

Jena Kirkpatrick: Not until I was nineteen, in my first year of college. I was working at an Earth Day event in Dallas, and this guy came up to me and said, "Hey, do you want to go to this poetry reading?" I

Cecily Sailer is the education programs manager for Badgerdog Literary Publishing, a writers-in-the-schools nonprofit based in Austin, Texas. Prior to her work with Badgerdog, Cecily taught for three years as a writer-in-residence with Writers in the Schools in Houston and spent a year teaching English as a Second Language in Seoul, South Korea. She holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of Texas, and her work has appeared in Texas Monthly online, The Austin American-Statesman, The Texas Observer, and Gulf Coast.

ended up going, though I didn't want to read, but they pushed me on stage at this little coffee house, and I read a poem. Afterwards, I was so excited.

I was flushed from being nervous, and I had to walk a few blocks just to bring my heart rate down. At that point, I was hooked.

CS: I've noticed you seize almost any opportunity to take poetry beyond the page, whether out in the community or through performance. What are the various ways you do this and why is it so important to you?

JK: To be an artist, I need to immerse myself in my art form. As I'm driving down the road, I'm constantly looking at things and aware of what's going on around me. I'm thinking of how to write, what to write. I'm taking notes. I think my art only grows when I share it. So, when I take my typewriter out to the farmer's market on weekends and I get ideas from people and I type a poem that affects their lives, then I'm sharing my art with them and they're



Photo by David Moynihan.

sharing their energy and love with me. And it just keeps going. It works the same way in the classroom.

CS: *About the farmer's market—every Saturday morning you set up there with your typewriter. You call it “Poems on the Spot While You Shop,” and people at the market come by and see you and request a poem. How do people react to you being there, writing poems in an outdoor grocery store?*

JK: A lot of times, people are in awe. They'll stop and say, “Can I take your picture?” or “What are you doing?” They're just fascinated I'm sitting out there with this manual typewriter. People will say—“Oh, I just want you to write about how beautiful this day is,” and that's fun because it gives me a lot of freedom. But other times people will say something like, “It's my parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. Can you create a poem for them? Here's the history of their life together...” So, as a writer, I get to sit there and hear the most amazing stories right on the spot. These people don't know me from Adam, and they're sharing their life histories with me or their love lives or something extremely personal. They're asking me to create a piece of art with that, and I feel honored to look at someone and see I've affected them. One woman told me, “I framed the poem you wrote for my daughter's first birthday, and it's hanging on her nursery wall.” So, you know, I'm there. I get to be a part of their lives. It's a huge honor.

CS: *One thing I admire about your teaching is that you consistently introduce students to the historical and social context of every poem you bring into the classroom. It's*

To be an artist, I need to immerse myself in my art form. . . . So, when I take my typewriter out to the farmer's market on weekends and I get ideas from people and I type a poem that affects their lives, then I'm sharing my art with them and they're sharing their energy and love with me. And it just keeps going. It works the same way in the classroom.

more remarkable to me because you work mostly with very young writers, and some poems were written in very difficult historical moments. How does this practice affect your students?

JK: The entire purpose of the workshops I run is to create a community of writers, and that means bringing every writer we study into our community. If my students know the time period in which a poem was written, they can really understand what

the words mean. Take a poet like Langston Hughes, who lived through segregation. I'm able to help my students understand what he's referencing, which is an essential part of his writing. Even with fourth-graders. We talk about it, even if it's on a very simple level. When we studied Woody Guthrie, the students were able to understand the Dust Bowl and why he wrote his songs. They all knew the song “This Land Is Your Land,” but they'd never broken it down and understood what the words mean.

CS: *In a sense, you also present students with a poet's résumé—the jobs he or she had before he was a poet or while she was a writer. You tell them, for example, that Langston Hughes was a busboy at one time. I imagine students see this as an invitation to be whatever kind of writer they dream of being.*

JK: You know, Jack Prelutsky was a furniture mover and a cab driver. I list all these different jobs on the board so students can see that people from all walks of life can become poets. Shel Silverstein was a composer and a musician. I also like to tell students that he hated interviews and that Jack Prelutsky hated

poetry in school. Actually, most poets hated poetry in school, and I love to tell kids that because they're like, "Wow! That's kinda like me." These poets didn't like poetry because they found it boring; they didn't connect to it. But they were able to change this by writing funny poems. So, the students say, "Oh, we can make poetry not boring?" And I tell them "yes, you can!"

CS: *One of your former students gave you a card that read, "My heart was dying without poetry." We at Badgerdog love to tell this story because it speaks to the transformative aspect of writing. Why do you think the writing workshop is such an empowering atmosphere for kids? Do you think the math or science classroom could bring similar results?*

JK: I know some fantastic teachers, and I think a math or science classroom could be transformative as a result of the teacher, but it's still nothing like writing. Writing is a personal act. Writing asks you to delve into your mind and your heart and your soul and to speak from that space. You can't educate someone on how to do that. You can say, this might help you get to that place, but the writer and the artist individually have to go there, and that's where the healing comes from. That's where the self-esteem comes from. They're sharing their innermost thoughts with you, and that's transformative.

Writing is a personal act. Writing asks you to delve into your mind and your heart and your soul and to speak from that space. You can't educate someone on how to do that. You can say, this might help you get to that place, but the writer and the artist individually have to go there.

CS: *You've been quoted saying elsewhere, "I'm not a business person, I'm a poet." What does it mean to you to say, I'm a poet?*

JK: I'm really proud to make a little money doing what I love to do, and I love to say, "I'm a poet." It really is what I put on my taxes and job applications, but the part about "I'm not a businesswoman" is funny because I have owned businesses, and I'm not really great at it. I'm the person who wants to talk and get to know someone. I'm great at building clientele or creating relationships and building a community of people, but I want nothing to do with the numbers, which is a detriment to me sometimes. When I'm out at the market writing poems, it's not my thing to ask for payment. If people want to give me something, they will. If it's supposed to be a smile or a high-five, then that's what it's going to be. If you need a poem for whatever reason, I'm supposed to give to it you. I don't know why, but that's just what I'm supposed to do. 🍷

Visit Jena Kirkpatrick's website at
JenaPoetForHire.com.