



Ravenna COLE Podcast

Episode #1. My Name is Ravenna Cole and Poetry Saved My Life

[00:00:00] **Blaise Cole:** Well, welcome to the Ravenna...

[00:00:08] **Ravenna Cole:** Okay, so I'm gonna just do glam here first because you're giving me your camera face, and your hair is a mess. Okay?

[00:00:16] **Blaise Cole:** All right. Take two. Take two. Welcome to the... Oh, actually first we need to do this. [Claps].

[00:00:22] **Ravenna Cole:** Okay, great. Now we have our little camera doodad. Yeah.

[00:00:27] **Blaise Cole:** Welcome to the Ravenna Cole Podcast.

I'm Blaise Cole, and this is Ravenna Cole. And we are here to talk about Ravenna's new music, poetry, and things what matter that come up along the way.

So I am the publisher at In the Wind Press and we are just releasing this brand new book, "The Alchemy of Grace," Ravenna Cole, our Author here. We are also married, have been for almost 20 years. And we've got four children who are trying very, very hard to be quiet in the background. Don't know how successful they'll be, but we'll see how that goes.

We wanted to use this podcast as a way to give a little bit of backstory into what's gone into the poems, because poems just aren't things that we read every day in this sort of common culture. So we wanted to sort of give some background talk about the work, and talk about this new way of reading the poems for us, which has been in the form of songs that Ravenna has composed.

So we'll get started here. Okay. Maybe we can start off by having you tell us a little bit about yourself and, really when you started writing poetry, how that's developed over the years and where you are now.

[00:02:41] **Ravenna Cole:** Okay, so that's of course a long arc, but I'll compress it. I started writing poetry in 2009. Seriously, though, I'd written quite a lot before that, that had gone into a wood stove at a farm that we were living at.

[00:03:00] **Blaise Cole:** So, so 2009, I'm gonna reveal your age here. How old were you then? So what's, what's going on in your life?

[00:03:07] **Ravenna Cole:** I mean, okay, so 2009 we have our first baby. I'm 30-something, something like 31, I think 31.

I don't know. And so I had written a lot before that, but had burned it, by way of agnes Martin's idea about getting free. She burned the first 20 years of her paintings. So I burned all of that early work and gotten free. And I had gone to graduate school for philosophy, where we met at the University of Chicago, both of us were in the PhD program in philosophy and, I had decided to return to a more poetic focus. Even though poetry remained very close to me all the way through graduate school, I had stopped actively writing it. I was working more intensively on a PhD dissertation on Kierkegaard, the Danish Christian philosopher who is also responsible for my conversion to Catholicism, or at least a big part of that journey.

So by 2009, I had gone to graduate school in philosophy, I had converted to Catholicism, I had met you and we had gotten married, and then we had our first baby, and then I started writing poetry at that time.

[00:04:32] **Blaise Cole:** There's, there's, there's a story here because I was there, I remember it so I can prod you for it.

[00:04:39] **Ravenna Cole:** After, after our eldest was born, we took a vacation down to Florida, I don't know.

[00:04:45] **Blaise Cole:** You said that for a long time you felt like poetry was closed off to you. Like you, like the poems weren't coming anymore. Not like they did when you were younger. But then something happened and suddenly the floodgates opened again and. You not only started feeling the need to write, but you were finding the words to write and something really changed, there, I'd love to sort of have you share some about that.

[00:05:14] **Ravenna Cole:** Okay. So, I mean, to back it up a little bit, I guess my, I mean I had these two really critical moments of coming into poetry when I was young. The first was. Hearing a poem read in my high school, my English teacher

by Emily Dickinson, who became then my sort of constant companion from about ninth grade on.

And then we moved from Pennsylvania to the Arizona Desert where a friend of mine who was deeply in love with poetry handed me a. A photocopy of TS Eliot's, the love song of J. Alfred Prufrock one day when we were outside in Arizona, sitting by her pool. And I read that poem and it just, I mean, just changed everything for me.

And I began pursuing poetry very seriously at that point. Which I then continued to do pretty constantly, but until I went to college, and started studying philosophy. And I think what happened when I started studying philosophy is that, I encountered Plato, I encountered Socrates, I encountered this idea that like, we know nothing.

I mean, I think suddenly I just like realized that I knew nothing. And I mean, like, I really knew nothing. And when I came into this like overwhelming feeling of knowing nothing, I just felt like I, how could I have anything to say? Like, how could I have anything to say if I'm. Knew nothing. And so I went through this arc from, so I entered college, I was maybe 19.

I'd gone to Europe for a while between high school and college. So I was a little bit later and I studied philosophy, intensely. Originally I was both in English and philosophy major, but I eventually left off the English major, just to pursue philosophy and that consumed the next, 10 years of my life basically because I went, I did undergraduate and graduate school in philosophy and, that entire time I was just trying to find the truth, like, I mean, that's what philosophy is about.

Of course. It's finding the truth and I just wanted the truth. I wanted to know. I mean, I think at some point I came into this idea in Aristotle that you can't make a thing. Well, you can't. Do perform an action well, if you don't know what its final end is, right? If I say, I wanna make a cup, well, I have to know what the cup is for, to know, to leave a, like, opening at the top to drink out of it, right?

So at that point, I sort of put these pieces together in my mind, which was like, how can I live life? Well if I don't know what my life is for like, the whole idea in Plato and Aristotle, in, in Socrates of a life well lived. I wanted to know what it meant to have a life well lived. And it struck me very forcibly at the time of studying Aristotle that I couldn't possibly know how to do that if I didn't know what my life was for.

And so that was sort of like the quest of those 10 years. It was like, what is my life for? Like, why am I here and what am I supposed to be doing and how am I

supposed to be living? And that, that question really consumed me over that entire 10 years of studying philosophy at. Many different kinds of philosophy, many different layers.

Continental, analytic, I mean like just the whole, I mean the whole arc of the history of philosophy, whatever. But that ultimately led me through a very circuitous and long and difficult and challenging decade to Kierkegaard who had sort of opened up the space of Christianity for me, again, in this very serious way.

I had been raised, sort of in non-denominational, kind of Protestant churches through my youth, and then left that off and became an atheist through college and graduate school. A very, very intensely so it was not casual atheism. And so to return to that through Kierkegaard was a really big deal to me to have him reopen the space of taking Christianity seriously.

So I'll, I'll jump in. Like it wasn't, what was it about, his thinking that made you take Christianity seriously? Again, it wasn't just like a cultural thing.

It was like. Okay, well, I mean this, well, specifically, right? I had been going through various levels of mental and psychological crises, right?

I mean, I was in pretty rough shape at that point in my life. And I found this book on this random Barnes and Noble bookstore where I was living and working on an organic farm in Pennsylvania where I grew up. And I was living with my grandparents, and I found this like book on the shelf called "The Sickness unto Death," which is by Kierkegaard.

And it was basically an etiology, a sort of breakdown of the forms of modern despair. What our despair looks like and where it comes from and the means to overcome it. And I remember very specifically sitting on the farm on, on this tree stump that had had been cut down as like enormous. It was like a hundred year old tree.

And I'm like sitting in the middle of it having my lunch break on this organic farm. And I opened this book and I start reading and I just can't believe it. Like. It's my despair to a T. Like, word for word, laid down on the page. My despair, like the shape of it, the exact shape of it, and I just couldn't believe it.

I mean, I could not believe that someone could identify so powerfully and so clearly the state of my soul, like at that moment in my life, like it, it was so powerful. And so I, that book just like began to open the world to me and I had taken a leave from the University of Chicago, from the PhD program to go to Europe and to go

work on this organic farm near my grandparents, 'cause I was like, like basically falling apart. I mean I was very, I was in bad shape. And at that time when that book became like, became part of me, I started entertaining the idea of going back and. Pursuing the rest of my PhD to study Kierkegaard. It so happened that my advisor at the University of Chicago was teaching a full length course that coming fall on that book, which the chances of that happening are just kind of unthinkable.

And so I, I went back to my graduate program to study that book for an entire semester with one of the most thoughtful people I've ever encountered in my life. And over the course of that, preparing then to write a dissertation on Kierkegaard and this a series of other events that unfolded, I ended up finding Catholicism.

My advisor recommended that I read this book by the man who had just become Pope Benedict XVI at that time. And that just showed me a new, another face of Christianity that I'd never seen before, having been raised sort of in the Protestant, non-denominational world. And so that book was Pope Benedict's, the "Introduction to Christianity."

And at the time when I turned the last page of that book, I just knew, like I knew that I'd found the truth that I was looking for. So I entered the Catholic Church in. The, at Easter 2006, so almost 20 years ago at this point. And , met, well, I met you before and we converted together and well, we, we met, we got married and then we converted, together not too long afterwards.

And then we, yeah, then by 2009 we've, we have our first baby. And we go on this vacation not long after he's born. And something happened on that vacation. Some, we were walking the shores of Anna Maria Island, and I don't know how to explain it. I just, something began to open and maybe I began to feel the flowing again of this idea that I did have something to say.

Like, not that I thought I knew anything by that point. Maybe there is a sense in which I'd say, like, I mean, I would venture to say I did find the truth. I did find the truth. I don't see what good it does us to pretend like we can go out in search of the truth. If we can't hold onto the hope of finding it, there would be no point in searching for it if we had no hope of finding it. And so I feel like I did find the truth, and I think that finding the truth allowed me to begin to recover a sense of my self and my purpose in the world that made it possible for me to begin speaking again to begin writing again, to be, and that was a very long and complicated process. I mean, some like TS Eliot, he also nearly finished his PhD in philosophy , and the, the philosopher, Maritain, Jacques Maritain, he says something like, it's a wonder Eliot could write any poetry. He had so much philosophy in him.

There is a way in which those two things can be in tension with one another. And it was a long time between, feeling like that space was opening to me again and like figuring out what to do with it. It was a very long and difficult process for me to return to the poetic space, the trust in poetry as a means to a different kind of knowing.

[00:15:17] **Blaise Cole:** I think the, the, the moment that the poetry found you when we were walking on the shore is very cinematic to me. It was, there was this movie that we, that we like very much called "Off the Map" in which an IRS agent goes to New Mexico and finds this hippie family And anyway, at, at some point he just sort of gets struck by the landscape and walks out into it slowly and is just looking at it.

I think something very similar happened, watching you walk out, walk out into the, into the waves with the sunset and you skirt billowing and the water was all very poetic and I'm carrying the kid. And, , but there's, , behind that the thing that that carries you out there is, I think.

Something like a vision, something like something that you're seeing but you don't fully understand.

[00:16:26] **Ravenna Cole:** For sure.

[00:16:27] **Blaise Cole:** The medieval mystic 13th century, I think Julian of Norwich talks about having received a vision and then taking the rest of her life to sort of unpack what that vision was.

[00:16:41] **Ravenna Cole:** Mm-hmm.

[00:16:42] **Blaise Cole:** I think what poetry often is for people is a kind of way of working through an articulation of something that they see. And we think of visions a lot of times as being supernatural in origin coming from outside of us.

[00:17:09] **Ravenna Cole:** Well, I think they do. They must manifestly. I mean, I think that's just the nature of a vision.

And I think, what we're working our way around to here is a discussion of the Lakota medicine man, Nicholas Black Elk, whose work I encountered in graduate school the second time around in 2016. I returned to the space of graduate school to pursue an MFA in poetry and I found this book along that early path of searching, in the early, very early stages of my graduate work called "Black Elk Speaks," which is a book about Black Elk's vision, his great vision that he received.

And it's written by the poet, the Nebraskan poet, John Neihardt, who, went and worked with Black Elk and his son, and then Neihardt's daughter to translate Black Elk's words and then to sort of write them into a book of deep poetic power and that book just was another book... I mean, there have been a series of books in my life that I would say have just like fundamentally changed my life and my worldview and like just the world itself for me.

And that was one of those books. And then subsequent to reading that book, I learned that he, that Black Elk had become Catholic.

[00:18:39] **Blaise Cole:** And he was a Catholic when he, he was a Catholic when he wrote that book.

[00:18:43] **Ravenna Cole:** But Neihardt omitted it. And that was a source of great tension between them. And that just kind of like, I mean, it was just like an explosion in my world to discover that fact about him after I'd read Black Elk Speaks in which it, it doesn't appear explicitly, but the, the, just the white hot heat of that book in my hands, like I could feel the fire of the truth of it, like radiating out from the pages as I was reading it, and then to find out that he was Catholic was just like, I couldn't even believe it.

I mean, I, I just couldn't believe it.

[00:19:21] **Blaise Cole:** And I think something of the, the truth of the vision is, I mean, when we were reading it. And there's a way in which we, we said, I can't believe this wasn't written by a Catholic. Yeah, it's true. I mean, you can feel it because it's just, it's the, the, the worldview, the view that emerges and the possibilities that the vision articulates are so consistent with our Catholic faith that it was, it seemed, we might have thought it was a "pre- Catholic" thing or something like that.

[00:20:03] **Ravenna Cole:** Yeah. That's the way you encounter Plato and Aristotle and you think, I mean, they, they just lay out the groundwork for this, this vision that is gonna come through Christ. And it's just so consonant.

[00:20:13] **Blaise Cole:** But, in fact it was this, incredible synthesis between the religious practices that he grew up with.

[00:20:29] **Ravenna Cole:** And then the Catholic, right, because of course Catholic of, he received his, I mean he received his great vision when he was nine. And it took him many, many, many years to come to groups with this.

And he, he was not Catholic at the time that he received his great vision, but then he became Catholic later and the, the sort of emergence of his understanding of his vision with his Catholicism and the way that that plays out, I think is just, I mean, for me, the encounter with that space was just spiritually and poetically completely overwhelming, but, like, in the best sort of way, I just felt like, surrounded by it. It gave me a vision for a different way of thinking about poetry, a different way of thinking about spirituality, a different way of thinking about my faith that was so rich and so deep, and it gave me an understanding of.

Poetry as the reception of a vision. And as you pointed out, when we were sort of preparing our thinking for this podcast, also bound up with the question of healing because of course, Nicholas Black Elk, it was very common for the medicine men, the medicine women, to be the people who received the visions.

And so the idea of a vision being bound up with, with healing, with the power of healing, was really important for me. At that time, I didn't even realize how important it was going to become later in my life. So I, I encountered this vision, this Black Elk's vision in 2016.

[00:21:58] **Blaise Cole:** I want, I wanna just sort of back up a second here.

Even what you've said about, say, Kierkegaard's book. And sort of how it reached you in a time when sort of things were falling apart. And you could see in the book a precise description of this despair that was eating you up. That book made possible a kind of healing from brokenness that, that you were dealing with.

That's, that's really remarkable.

[00:22:34] **Ravenna Cole:** No, that's true. And I mean, the idea that we, that, that there are different levels of healing in our lives and that we, we need physical healing many times in our lives. We also need spiritual healing and, emotional healing, psychological healing, all of these different levels of healing that we have to find in our lives to survive ourselves and our, and our histories and our pasts.

And I think, that that idea was deepened for me when I encountered Black Elk in, in 2016 when I encountered him, I had been writing for five years, I had a lot of work that I just, I mean, I was just sort of continuing to wrestle with this, needing to break through to this vision that I felt taking shape in me, but I just couldn't reach it.

It was another, , the, the, the Book of, Black Elks book kind of sent me on this journey that resulted in the. Now seven books of poetry. I have. So I mean, we're

releasing this one first, but this is not my first book that was in "The Alchemy of Grace" in order of composition. It's, it's, where is it?

In order of composition? It's 1, 2, 3. Three in terms of the books that we have. Yeah, so the first of which being a collection of four smaller works. So yeah, so, but the, the, the four smaller works. So the very beginning of that journey really began with Black Elk and that's, that was Ave Maria. Ave Maria was the first work I composed after encountering Black Elk.

And he is really the one that sent me on this journey that resulted in these. Seven works of poetry total with the first one being an early work that includes four complete works. And we're releasing this, this one first for various reasons, which we can talk about at some point. But that journey of the arriving at the books took from 2016 to 2024.

Right? Give or take. 'Cause I wrote the last one at the end of 2024. And, so that was, that was that journey. That journey was about the books. It was about the page poem. It was about what the word on the page can do and what kind of healing is possible there. Which, of course, poetry on the page had been my life force.

I mean, I carried around Dickinson like, like a bible really for most of my life, and, and Eliot as well, and more than I could count in between there, Hopkins and Stevens and, I mean, goes on and on.

[00:25:07] **Blaise Cole:** And you talk, you talk frequently about poetry saving your life. Yeah. Yeah. Elaborate.

[00:25:18] **Ravenna Cole:** I mean, I do because I, well, I guess I wanna say, I think one of the things that we have a tendency to think about poetry is that it's something that's.

[00:25:29] **Blaise Cole:** Literary. It's literary, it's something you do that you do wearing a tweed coat and smoking a pipe. And it's the cream sauce on top of the meat and potatoes of culture or something like that.

[00:25:51] **Ravenna Cole:** I mean, I think, I mean, I think at some level it's kind of just terribly sad that that's our view of poetry as a culture.

Because I do think that poetry, the, the Mexican poet, Octavio Paz said if we forget poetry, we forget ourselves and return to the original chaos. And I think that's just

flatly true. Like poetry is the guard against that chaos. It is the thing that makes us who we are, that allows us to be who we are and without it.

We can't be ourselves. We forget ourselves. We don't, we no longer know how to be ourselves, and I think that the journey of healing for anybody, the journey of healing, what that means is that we come into the world as these broken selves. We can feel it straight out the gate. I mean, any one of us who wants to deny that is just lying to ourselves.

We can feel that we're broken. We come into the world broken. We just get more and more broken. We get our hearts stomped on, we get our feelings hurt. We get our, our bodies break. We, we, we get broken in a million ways by people around us, by circumstance, by history, by politics, by, our failing bodies and our failing earth.

I mean, there are a million ways that we get hurt, and so we just get more and more and more broken. And I think that this way of seeking healing is. To become our true selves, like we all feel it. There's this true self that we are called to be, and when we feel lonely and we feel objectified and we feel hurt, and we feel invisible, and we feel ignored, and we feel worthless and unimportant, it's that feeling that like that true self is, is like.

Pure glory, right? It's like, it's like a radiant light in the world. And if we can find it and it can become visible, then we can be seen as the selves that we were made to be and we can be known and loved as the selves that we are made to be. And I think we all feel that desire, we all feel that need like so deeply within ourselves.

And so the idea for me that poetry is part of this journey of healing. That for me, Catholicism of course, was the huge, the, the main part of this healing is this idea that, that, that what healing is, is to become yourself. And for Kierkegaard, especially this journey of becoming yourself, of finding your true self, becoming your true self is like the hardest thing on earth to do.

It is not just something that's just like, like a little Hallmark card platitude, like, you know. To thine own self be true. I mean, okay, let's

[00:28:30] **Blaise Cole:** Seven steps to becoming your own self.

[00:28:33] **Ravenna Cole:** Right, exactly, I mean like this is not a seven step or a 12 step program. I think it is like the hardest thing on earth to do.

It's like a real level of journey that we're talking about fraught with that much danger, that much uncertainty, that much difficulty, that much challenge it, it's impossible, basically. It's an impossible journey to become your true self. But for the Catholic, I would say, it's achievable by grace. Hence the Alchemy of Grace, right?

Being the first book that we're, we are releasing, and I think, I think even for a non-Catholic there, there are ways of being receptive to poetic forces being receptive to spiritual forces that are just abundant and around all the time, available to all of us, all of the time, to aid in this journey to becoming our true selves and becoming known and loved and visible as the true selves that we are and that we were made to be, but we have to work for.

So I think that for me, poetry did save my life. It has saved my life more times than I could count. There are very specific poems that I could point to and say, this poem saved my life. At this point, this poem saved my life at this point, right? I mean, over the course of my life, when I have been on that edge, when I have been riding that edge, and I have ridden that edge a lot, I think that's not uncommon for poets because we have to stay very close to the abyss.

Like we, we stand on that edge and we look into the abyss of ourselves and. We have to be willing to stand on that edge, and we have to be willing to take the risk that standing on that edge involves knowing we could fall. And many have, I guess I...

[00:30:33] **Blaise Cole:** one of the things that comes to mind here is the story that your grandfather told you.

I think that'd be really illuminating. It's true. This is if you're okay to share it.

[00:30:44] **Ravenna Cole:** No, this story does actually appear in the last work that I have just completed, which we are not releasing right away. But my grandfather, went through some really dark times in his, like, and...

[00:30:57] **Blaise Cole:** and he told this to you when, when you were going through some dark times.

[00:30:59] **Ravenna Cole:** He told me when I was going through some really dark times in my life, where, he, he had just, he, I mean he was just on the edge of suicide and, he was just really, very seriously contemplating ending it all.

And he was driving I think towards this place where he is basically planning to drive his car off of a cliff. And he is sitting there in the car and like, shaking and sobbing and wrestling, like, do I hit the gas pedal or not, basically, and you know that to be or not to be moment.

And he remembers this poem, these lines from this poem that he memorized in high school. My grandfather wasn't really a much of a poet, but he had memorized these lines from this poem. And in high school, I am the. Master of I'm the captain of my fate. I'm the master of my fate. I'm the captain of my soul, I think is how they go.

I don't, I should know. It's a very famous poem. And somehow those lines gave him the strength to choose to be, to not choose not to be as Hopkins put it. And so we turned the car around and went home and, you know, I'm here because of that. So like, I mean, my, my father wasn't yet in the world and if my grandfather had gone over that cliff that day, I would not exist.

It's crazy to think about this, that there's this poem that came to my grandfather at this moment when he was contemplating ending his life and it made me possible. So like, that's crazy to stop and really think about these things. So somewhere back there is a poem that made me possible, this man who bared his soul on the page and left it.

Some hundreds of years later, another man finds those lines in his heart and a moment when he's just ready to give up and he finds the strength and the courage and the hope not to give up. And that makes my life possible.

I mean, I think there's a, you know, one of the things that poetry can do is it can show you a piece of the true self of your true self, which right, our true selves are both individual and unique and shared like the, the, the deeper and you go into what makes you you, the more directly you have to face your humanity.

And the more directly you face your humanity, the more you realize that what makes you you is actually something that's shared with all the other humans in the world. For sure. I mean, I want to turn to this idea of the vision and the healing and what it means to be a poet, but maybe we should stop the video, stop the video, and make sure we're actually filming and get ready for a second session.

Join us next time as we talk about music and what it means to perform poetry and this time and place. Thank you for listening.