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**Introducing the SRPR Illinois Poet:  
Beth Ann Fennelly**

Beth Ann Fennelly grew up in Lake Forest, IL. In 1993, she received her B.A. *magna cum laude* from the University of Notre Dame. The following year, she taught English in a coal mining village on the Czech/Polish border, and returned to the States for an M.F.A. from the University of Arkansas after which she held the Diane Middlebrook Fellowship from the University of Wisconsin. Currently she is Assistant Professor of English at Knox College in Galesburg, IL. Her chapbook, *A Different Kind of Hunger* won the 1997 *Texas Review* Breakthrough Award. She has poems in *TriQuarterly*, *Shenandoah*, *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The American Scholar*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Best American Poetry 1996*, and *The Pushcart Prize 2001: Best of the Small Presses*.

Out of the Ordinary—  
A Discussion with Beth Ann Fennelly

**SRPR:** You live in Galesburg, Illinois and teach at Knox College, via the Czech Republic and the M.F.A. program at the University of Arkansas. This is a strange peregrination—and homecoming.

**Beth Ann:** After I graduated from college, I wanted to try something hard, something that would test me, so I went to a little mining town on the Polish-Czech border to teach English. It was hard—very lonely, very polluted, and everyone, including me as I made about \$30 a month, was extremely poor. Though no longer communist-controlled, the rural areas still behaved as if they were—my mail was opened and read, I stood in long lines to buy groceries, my developed photos were opened and perused at the photo shop. The coal miners there valorized communism—it had at least taken care of them, and now they couldn't make a living. I think the whole experience changed my thinking about writing. I thought I'd be writing and improving as a writer all the time there, but there was nobody to read it or to speak English with. So I read all the time, and worried. That year felt like ten. But it matured me a lot and made me know I needed an M.F.A. I still dream about that place. I think it had a huge effect on my psyche, taught me a lot about the essentials of human nature. I learned to depend on myself for everything.

**SRPR:** Isolation in an unfamiliar environment attenuates thought, gesture, mode of being. What we normally do out of habit suddenly requires thought and effort. I still remember how much time grocery shopping took, or asking for a bathroom, the first time I lived in Germany back in 1970. I felt like a child dropped in a basket onto Mars. Nothing was familiar or easy. But that attenuation of consciousness gives an edge and authority to writing. Your poems, like “Good Work if You Can Get It,” show that authority. Even Arkansas must have felt to you like another country.

**Beth Ann:** When I realized I needed an M.F.A., I looked through the *AWP Program Guide*, and Arkansas was one of the few that just said to send your poems. Since I didn't have the money for lots of applications to graduate schools, I sent in my poems from the Czech Republic, and was accepted into the program. The formal application procedure came

later, when I could afford it. Further, I knew I wanted to teach, so I figured the four-year program would give time to develop my teaching as well as my writing, publications, and knowledge of the discipline. And yes, Arkansas did feel like another country. But in a way, I felt more at home there than I'd felt anywhere. For the first time I had a community—a community of writers who made me feel it was okay to have that kind of writerly passion.

**SRPR:** Four years is nearly as long as a Master's plus Ph.D. Did you have to take the same kind of qualifying exams as Ph.D. students?

**Beth Ann:** Oh yes, people were throwing up in the halls. We had to take classes even in our fourth year while we were putting together a thesis.

**SRPR:** There should be a distinction among kinds of M.F.A.'s—some are two years and more like Master's degrees, some are low residency and not graded, some are closer to Ph.D. programs.

**Beth Ann:** I agree. It's a problem that there is no real standard across the country. I am so glad I had to study the canon, master traditional forms, write and read critically. Though I am trying non-traditional and experimental styles now, I'm grateful I have that secure foundation. It nourishes what I'm doing now and probably always will.

**SRPR:** Do you have a book-length manuscript circulating?

**Beth Ann:** Yes, it's been a finalist in several contests, so I hope something happens soon. It's hard to keep your courage up.

**SRPR:** A poet who is experimenting with different forms, styles, and subject matter has a hard time in the poetry contest world. She'll get high praise from the final judge who is only looking for *the winner*—which often means a seamless voice, a clarified style.

**Beth Ann:** I have poems ranging from forms like sestinas to highly experimental. Yet some of the traditional poems have won major awards or been published in good places, so they are still in the manuscript.

**SRPR:** Judges for single poem contests and for book contests look for different things. The single poem rises to the top on its merit alone. It has to be a kind of perfect poem, arresting, memorable. In a book manuscript, if there are poems so radically different from each other as to detract from the aggregate impression of the book, a judge may award it a finalist designation but give the award to the manuscript that is unified in its impression overall.

**Beth Ann:** This is something I am wrestling with. For example, I have a long poem coming out in the *Kenyon Review*, with a critical commentary

by Bob Hass. It's a very strange poem, very experimental, it goes where the language demands. But it is in my manuscript with poems in traditional forms. It may be difficult for a judge to read them together.

**SRPR:** Often this is a quandary especially for poets putting together a first book, and it is exacerbated for women writers who have demanding jobs and children. It's very hard to write enough poems in a single style to achieve that seamlessness. You may have 20 stylistically coherent poems, and then your style changes as you change. Experimentation and change is a good thing, for writers of all ages, but it is a paradox that the more postmodernism has vexed issues of closure and linearity, and as fiction and poetry have reinvented themselves to resist the linear and unified narrative, the more the expectation for books of poems has standardized. Your life has been a continual escape from the norm, an experimentation with self and poetic growth, though you grew up in an "ordinary town," Lake Forest, Illinois, characterized in the film *Ordinary People* by wealth, conspicuous consumption, superficial values, and a WASPish and Irish Catholic population. But it also houses, amid all those thinly inhabited mansions on Green Bay Road, the Ragdale Foundation—an Artists' Colony, in fact, my writing refuge of choice. How does a town like this produce a poet?

**Beth Ann:** If there is a relationship between where I grew up and my writing, it was negative. I never felt like I fit in. I never knew about Ragdale until a couple of years ago. I went to an all-girl private school there where the girls were popular in proportion to their eating disorders. The emphasis was on looks and money, none on the arts or self-expression. I wrote, but I didn't place much importance on it, nor did I show it to anybody.

**SRPR:** Lake Forest is beautiful, especially the restored natural prairie grounds that belong to Ragdale, but a little schizy—all of the artists are accommodated in this gorgeous, quiet Arts and Crafts house and barnhouse originally built by Howard Van Doren Shaw, and there is almost no contact between them and the townspeople. It could function as a metaphor for art's relationship to society.

**Beth Ann:** I think I was angry at the town, but now I can see it a different way, as a very beautiful place, just not a place that feels like home. A writer makes and remakes her home in her work, and it may be advantageous to this process to have felt alienated.