



Library podcast

Kay Redfield Jamison discusses 'Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire'

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[00:00:35] Good evening. Hi everybody. I'm Stesha Brandon. I'm the Literature and Humanities Program Manager here at Central Library. Welcome to tonight's event with Kay Redfield Jamison. Thank you to L.A. Bay Book Company for inviting us to co-present this evening. I would also like to thank our author series sponsor Gary Kunis and the Seattle Times for their generous support for library programs. We're also grateful to the Seattle Public Library Foundation so to library foundation donors here with us tonight. We say thank you very much for your support. Now let me turn the podium over to Rick Simonson from Elliott Bay Book Company. And Rick will introduce the rest of the program. Thank you Sasha. and

[00:01:16] To say thank you and welcome as following stoushes. Doing so for tonight we are delighted and honored to be helping present this evening with Kay Redfield Jamison who has been to Seattle for some of her past books and it's a loop of time that goes on now over 20 years of the book she's here with tonight is an extraordinary book that was just getting incredible attention and reviews as it should. A book entitled Robert Lowell setting the river on fire a study of genius mania and character. Those of you who familiar with the body of her work which goes back to a two it was one of those major text book studies done first in 1990 on manic depressive illness.

[00:02:06] But the first book that came after that her first book that kind of went out to the larger public has has a title with a little symmetry to the new one which was Touched With Fire manic depressive illness and the artistic temperament and the artistic temperament in that book is also part of an arc that goes to what she's done with Robert Lowell bleep Lord Byron was part of a significant part of that book along with others. But the book she's with she's here with tonight is is a book that traces in all sorts of ways the life and work of Robert Lowell and it's a poet who died in 19 quite suddenly in 1977 at a point where he you know his place in the poetic pantheon of the time was totally significant. And it's interesting with poetic but you know poets and what happens is that he's been less evident than some others of his generation lately so this book is actually helping bring that attention back with her reading of his work and his life and his. And what what helped fuel his writing and if you connect dots

one of the people praising this book is the poet translator and publisher Jonathan glossy whose own work is quite wonderful but he's also the publisher. So he's there's a nice new edition of Robert Lowell selected poems out that is helping for people besides reading and seeing with what she has done in this book with it. There's been I suspect there's been a poem of his included up here. The things she's helped write about Kay Redfield Jamison to help write about in all these books have helped give us language to talk about these things and and live with them and celebrate what there is to celebrate and understand too.

[00:04:04] She is here. She'd think of and I'm sure she's teaching. We are also glad she's got not on east coast travels this week but she's here as a as the Daily Show Family professor and mood disorder and professor and a professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins. Among her many honors and distinctions are the Lewis Thomas Prize of the Rhoda and Bernard Sarnat International Prize in medic medic mental health for the Nash from the National Academy of Medicine and the John T.

[00:04:38] John T and John D and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship which she's received but the wonderful thing too is her language that she writes with which you will get to send someone in. Hearing her tonight and definitely as you read this amazing new book. So again for everyone at Elliott Bay we thank you very much again for being here.

[00:04:59] And now as you please join in welcoming Kay Redfield Jamison thank you.

[00:05:10] I'm delighted to be back in Seattle and this wonderful library.

[00:05:16] I'm also delighted to see my fourth grade teacher who seek me on writing. Lyla Doyle who's up there with her daughter Tori. Thank you so much for inviting me and thank you Elliot Bay for supporting me. We're rebooting

[00:05:35] Whatever that means and always has a mystical quality to it.

[00:05:40] So we're going to be doing is just talking a little bit about the making of the book. The research that goes into writing a biography and going through some of the medical and psychiatric records. Robert Lowell's daughter was kind enough to give me permission to look at his medical and psychiatric records which meant months and months and months of trying to track down very old medical records on microfiche and across town everything from Boston to London to to New York so I spent a lot of time his New Englander so I spent a lot of time in a lot of new england archives. And then Robert Lowell's like archives which are mostly at Harvard. So I want to talk just a little bit about what goes into that and a bit about the nature of his illness which was a very severe form of manic depression or bipolar illness okay.

[00:06:38] So I think what we're going to do is it's saved upstairs upstairs doesn't have the audio. So two of the poems that Robert.

[00:06:49] Ok we may get the audio. I just had two poems that Robert Lowell recorded himself just to give you a sense of who he was so then after I hope after. My talk that I'd I just want to read a little bit about Robert Lowell as an American in this day and age of art about being an American poet and about the cycles of decay and valor in American history. I was just stuck I'll just start with the end. Absolutely. Let me just give you a brief biographical sketch which is in this Robert Lowell was born in 1917 in Austin to a very old Boston and New England family and he died in 1977 and he was the great poet of his age and hugely well-known and influential for his writings. It's been my great pleasure and privilege to spend much of my life over the last several years in the company of the surprisingly complex and original Robert Lowell when he was in his twenties. Lowell wrote a poem Mr. Edwards and the spider which he included in the book that received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry when he was twenty nine years old in 1946. In that poem he wrote your lacerations tell the losing game you play against a sickness past your cure how the hands be strong.

[00:08:35] How will the heart endure. These lines lie at the heart of my book setting the river on fire. Is a book about a great poet. His work, his mental illness. Lowell was hospitalized 20 times for very severe mania and his character his iron discipline encourage is also a book about exemplars about heroes.

[00:09:04] How will the hands be strong. How will the heart endure is a book about the connections between mania depression and art I first read Mr. Edwards in the spider when I was 17 years old after my first break down my high school English teacher did me the great favor of introducing me to the work of Robert Lowell who he said he thought I might like I did and I'm here tonight with a book there's my tribute to Lowell's great art his life his suffering and his courage. Robert Lowell was first foremost and always an American poet you have brought something to bear on us.

[00:09:48] Elizabeth Hardwick said to him Elizabeth Hardwick was his second of his three wives and a great writer. She said you have brought something to bear on our land on your past your people your family. You are the most American of souls the most gifted in finding the symbolic meaning of this strange place. Lowell's ancestors were entwined into the life of America his family had come over on the Mayflower fought an American Revolution. Been a defining influence in New England among its thinkers writers business leaders and predominantly among its abolitionists the final chapter of my book setting the river on fire as focuses on locals America and discussing one of his great poems for the union dead the poem is about Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the black first black regiment in the north. That Colonel Shaw led to us to death and glory during the Civil War.

[00:11:01] It is as well about the monument raised on Boston Common in commemoration of Shaw and his men quite stunningly beautiful bar relief in Boston. If if any of you saw the film glory at the end of the film the film is about this regiment. Lowell was related to Shaw and many people in this in the civil war and at the end of the film you'll see this the ball relief with credits going over. It's a really beautiful piece of art for the union dead pulls together many strands of Lowell's thinking and experience. It combines his public voice and political conscience with autobiography Bound and history. It is first and foremost an American poet. It stares into the American character as the Eagles gazes unblinkingly into the sun is about a nation born encourage and descending into slack and rust

is about valour and the corruption of valor. It asks which noble acts which right things done. Enter and stay in memory what remains what can be preserved when Art memorializes acts of courage and high deeds can stand against indifference is decay. Moral civic inevitable decay was not new to America. It had been in her soul since her founding at times dormant at times deadly William Bradford the second governor of a closed colony had written about moral decay a few years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. God had given them danger he said. Then deliverance complacency is set in the cycles of early New England life had followed a relentless course peril than safe harbor uprooting storms droughts. Then once again fair shot sun shining days suffering and renewal madness and healing. Death and Resurrection only flux did not change. It was the rhythm of the natural world. It was the rhythm of mood and madness of imagination.

[00:13:31] It was the rhythm of the national character. There would be times of valor. Times of fire in the American imagination. But there would be longer periods of moral stagnation if the country's fortune held an infusion of courage would return often enough to save the depleted state Plymouth had been exemplar then it was not the American Revolution had bred extraordinary thinkers and leaders and the colonies had thrived. They had innovated. Pioneers had moved westward brought up life from the prairies. The country had been again for a while. John Winthrop city on the hill then rot set in and and spread it was in the nature of things fullness of growth pushed life into false security drove it into decay and death. No rot could compare in degree or kind to slavery. The original sin of America it was the unsurvivable evil for which the nation would be held accountable and ruthless measure America's civil war would continue.

[00:14:40] As Lincoln proclaimed until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword not a little of this blood drawn with a sword was given by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his Black Regiment as they attacked the Confederate battery at Fort Wagner half of the Regiment died or was badly wounded is at the heart of for the union dead in the dedication of the Shaw Memorial in 1897. William James whose brother had fought in Shaw's regiment together spoke together with Booker T Washington. William James spoke of civic courage individual valor the kind that resists the forces that corrupt the stands against the civility of the modern world. It was the day by day civic courage of those who act reasonably who act swiftly against corruption he said. Those who resist rabid partisanship evils must be checked in time said William James before they grow so great. It was the subject Robert Lowell returned to. Time and time and time again it was critical to his view of society and himself. Character the struggle to master the difficult the impossible. The determination to persist not to squander time or gift a set course toward a new True North. These were what mattered. I should say this is in the context of of Robert Lowell's really horrific illness and his ability to get back on his feet after I mean he had the kind of manias that six Boston police officers would have to come in and tackle him and put him in a straight jacket and take him off either to jail or to hospital the hospital. These are not mild manias these were not drug company pastel versions of mania. They were the real thing and he had them over and over and over again until he finally was treated with lithium. Toward the end of his life. I have always been interested. I ran the Mood Disorders Clinic at UCLA for many years and I've always been interested in the differences between okay.

[00:17:19] I'm going to come back to the tail end of this OK. This is a totally higgledy piggedly talk. Forgive me. It's actually the way my mind higgledy piggedly is long but I try and clean them up and revision.

[00:17:30] But. Okay so

[00:17:35] This is a picture of Robert Lowell and Robert Lowell was somebody described by everyone who knew him. And these are the great intellects of his time poets writers. Just intellectuals in general who described him as the only the only genius they ever knew. True genius he he thought in an unbelievably complex fascinating sort of way. This picture of him in 1963 and Paris can you put this is a poem that Rob part of a poem that Robert Lowell wrote when he was hospitalized. Waking in the blue. OK.

[00:18:19] This is just part of the fall as your day makes my agonized blue window bleaker. Crows maunder on the petrified fairway. Absence!

[00:18:29] My heart grows tense as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill.

[00:18:35] This is the house for the "mentally ill." Cock of the walk,
I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey. before the metal shaving mirrors,
and see the shaky future grow familiar, in the pinched, indigenous faces of these thoroughbred
mental cases,

[00:18:56] Twice my age and half my weight. We're all old timers. Each of us holds a locked razor.

[00:19:07] This is a poem from his credibly influential volume called Life Studies.

[00:19:15] And in it he wrote.

[00:19:19] Powerfully about mental illness that was not the primary focus of it but he had a few of of poems in there about it and it brings up a couple of things. One is the he was from a great deal of privilege and one of the things I tried to bring out was privilege gets you only so far if you have very bad disease so if you have pancreatic cancer and stage four you may have privilege but it you know it's it's it's awful. Likewise with Lowell he had a really horrendous form of bipolar almost as bad as it gets and what he. There was nothing that could prevent future episodes. So he lived in terror of future madness and in his. If you read his psychiatric records the discussions with his doctors on the ward were time and time again the remorse guilt and shame that he felt for what he had done when he was manic which was pretty terrible stuff and terror. Of. When was it going to come back again. And so here he's talking about these thoroughbred mental cases that looking in the mirror and seeing the future unfold in front of him with great terror just acknowledged two people. Harriet Winslow Lowell his daughter up there who as I say was kind enough to grant me access to his medical and

psychiatric records but also granted a lot of interviews and discussion with her about her parents and her father and her relationship with her father.

[00:21:05] She was crazy about her father and most people who knew Lowell. He was very soft spoken gentleman very kind very generous was always tracking down fellowships and grants for his students and colleagues. But when he got manic he was abusive as most people are when they're manic and verbally abusive occasionally physically violent just completely having affairs very public affairs and so forth. But people remained very close to him and very loyal to him. And in fact if you look at the people who are as pallbearers his pallbearers were most of his pallbearers were people men he'd gone to school with. And so it's one of those interesting things where you can have a devastating illness that really affects relationships and yet somebody who came back time and time again from that Thomas Traill is my husband and he just did everything was wonderful he's he's a cardiologist at Hopkins. And so he wrote The there's a final appendix in the book that is Lowell's medical history. But he also was incredibly good with the literary side of things as well. So this is just a brief brief summary of his professional life his poetic life. He was born in Boston. And as I say in 1917 he went to Harvard.

[00:22:35] He lived at Lowell House for a while and then decided he didn't want to be at Lowell House. He didn't want to be at Harvard anymore didn't want. He wanted to be away from New England and most importantly he wanted to go study with serious serious poets. So he went to other Kenyon College converted to Catholicism in a very manic period took very seriously as he did everything is very serious deep deep deeply serious man. During the World War Two he went to prison as a conscientious objector because of the firebombing of Germany as a Catholic conscientious objector not because who refused to serve. He actually volunteered four times and been turned down because of his eyesight terrible eyesight. So it's very clear he was not going to be asked to serve. Me. He'd volunteered but at some point he objected to the American subjugation ultimate subjugation of Germany. So he was a convicted felon for the rest of his life. And then he as you can see these are his major books certainly Lord where his castle life study is just incredibly important books. And he died in 1977. In New York he was as a city was married three times and he was leaving his third wife in England to come back to his second wife in New York and died underneath her window in New York in a cab.

[00:24:19] The research and background for the book was getting medical records and psychiatric records. Lots of libraries and archives and interviews of locals friends and colleagues and students are all still quite a few of his students who are still alive remember him very well his poetry and his prose his prose is actually really incredibly good insisted his poetry is more famous and then his course and his letters and papers. So this is just an example of just giving a few examples of the kind of material for for the book. This is one of the sheets from his medical records and you can see Thorazine Thorazine Thorazine Thorazine which is an antipsychotic that came into use in the 1950s and is probably the one drug most responsible for clearing out the mental hospitals and the asylums in the United States. This is one of the voluntary hospitalizations that later turned into a couple months later turned into an involuntary one. But you can see if you can read that which you probably can't because I can read it from here. But it's basically saying that the patient has agreed to be

admitted to the hospital because of his concerns about being manic again to protect himself and to protect other people. I went way back as all of you know bipolar illness is very hereditary very genetic.

[00:25:57] So I went back on both sides or all sides of his family and this is just one example I start the book in 1865 in Cambridge with Lowell's great great grandmother Harriet Lowell being taken by carriage from her beautiful house in Cambridge which is now the House of the president of Harvard being taken from this very gracious house of the view of the Charles and great elm trees and taken about a mile or so away to McClain hospital. And at that time McClain asylum for the insane. She died insane. She also was the person who Lowell believed brought poetry to the Lowell line. So I tracked her way back and her parents and her. Mother's parents and it's various artists saturated with mental illness. Mary Spence Harry Spence Lowell's one who died and say Mary Spence was wrote many letters about losing her mind and being concerned about she would never be sane again and so forth to a husband her husband Keith Spence who was an officer in the United States Navy and he was likewise writing back long letters about his melancholia and how debilitating it was and so forth. And her mother Mary Spence's mother had been there were court proceedings in New Hampshire for or against her. So this is just give you an idea of what one of the pieces of correspondence because it's fascinating you sit there and you read these things if you can read them.

[00:28:02] Partly they're blotchy partly. A lot of them have a lot of parts of the pages cut out by someone for discretion sake. So this is just looking at his ancestry. New England is always easy I think to oversell and to say you know it just conjures up these images immediately because of American history and good bad and indifferent. And the Puritans and all the problems from the Puritans. But in fact Lowell was saturated in New England and the 19th century thinkers in particular and they were in his bones and his students described how Lowell when he was in the classroom you know if he was talking about Tennyson he was with Tennyson. It was not a question of just talking about Tennessee. He had this incredible capacity imagination the capacity to glide into somebody else. And he did this particularly with the 19th century. He was a classicist by training so he did this with Homer and Virgil. But he also did it with the New England writers. So this was his mother's psych psychiatrist's record of the family history and you can see the Winslow's which are an old Mayflower family as well over on this side.

[00:29:18] And then Robert Lowell was Robert Lowell the fourth going down this line here so this is just part of the discussion of the genetics of the illness or ancestry. This is the Lowell Coat of Arms at Lowell House. His cousin was president of Harvard.

[00:29:38] This is McClain asylum for the insane.

[00:29:42] In 1845 when his great great grandmother was institutionalize this is her admission note saying that she had been insane for many years and talking about it and so it goes on for many months. And she's not doing much except being depressed and unresponsive and then at some point she becomes completely manic throwing furniture around indeed throwing furniture around McClain just like look Robert Lowell was to be throwing furniture around McClain one hundred years later but violent and very disturbed deep this is just again the beholding loss to New England and also. One of

the locals great poems early poems the Quaker graveyard in Nantucket based on Thoreau based on Melville based on the old testament a incredibly violent turbulent poem reigned in by great art and discipline. He Lowell took a segment from Thoreau's writing about Cape Cod and shipwreck that cape on Cape Cod. And so this is one of the Thoreau. What like George Washington was a surveyor and a great surveyor. And so this is just one of throws drawings of Nantucket and this is Lowell. Shortly after he got his first Pulitzer Prize winner is twenty nine years old and. Just before this is the year he. Was first hospitalized for mania. He'd been very sick before that he had been treated first when he was 15. But he was first wildly psychotic and uncontrollably psychotic in 1949 so let me just talk a little bit about Lowell's illness and his art and then get back to the tale of the tale. Lowell always had depressions after his manias and in fact he had the classic sort of thing.

[00:31:51] What we know about if you're going to be a good responder to lithium the clinical. Predictors of a good response to lithium. Are. A strong family history of bipolar illness and grandiose manias as opposed to totally dysphoric paranoid manias and having your mania first followed by depression as opposed to being depressed first and then manic. So Lowell fit all of those things. So when it came to lithium he actually ended up being a very good responder to lithium. So he always had he was only hospitalized for depression once but he always had several months of depression after each manic attack. But it was the manic attacks that got him into the most difficult. And during those periods he would be very grandiose he would have delusions of grandeur he would think he was Achilles. And it's interesting because his again his classical. Scholarship had him thinking he was Achilles thinking he was Alexander the Great thinking he was Don Tay T.S. Eliot Jesus quite often. Occasionally Hitler I mean just people of immense power and so forth. But in fact he would sit there and his daughter describes being visiting him in the hospital once and T.S. Eliot was actually his publisher. And in England his English publisher and he was also the person who turned over the mantle. Of poetry modern poetry to quite public ceremony. Many people interpreted that that way to Lowell. And Lowell was in the hospital and Harriet went to visit him one day and she saw him with the wasteland to copy the wasteland to taking out every other line and say Don't you think it reads much better this way.

[00:33:55] So he was convinced he was T.S. Eliot. He was convinced he was Dante. He was convinced he was Caesar. And so forth. So it was a thin line between this incredibly imaginative mind and historic mind that then when he was manic just lost all of capacity. And very often had religious delusions as I say he he thought he was Christ he thought he could walk on the Sea of Galilee and so forth is violent. On several occasions physically violent he was a big man who six foot one and frightening as people tend to be slept little or not at all had a lot of affairs which is very common one things that I've done in my book is to try and trace mania in the clinical literature at several thousand years ago to see what people wrote about mania how they treated mania. And one of the things that's clear is that the diagnosis some people call that various things often mania but very very similar to the clinical presentation that we received today including affairs and violence and dancing around and so forth so law was treated with the treatments of his time in 1949 when he was first hospitalized in northern New England Northern Massachusetts. He was treated with hospitalization itself which is the good treatment in the sense of keep people from generally keeps people from harming themselves or harming other people or doing more damage.

[00:35:48] We don't tend to think of hospitalization as a treatment per se but it's actually that's what Lowell had. He also had at that time electroshock therapy which remains a very good treatment for very bad bipolar or suicidal depressions. In this day and age you use quite what widely and in hospitals now but at that time it was also used for acute mania. It was a very good work very effectively for him turned his manias around pretty quickly. The problem with electroshock therapy is that it doesn't prevent future episodes. It treats only the acute episode so Lowell got treated for it but then it would always come back until he was put on lithium many years later. He was also given a hydrotherapy. This is kind of what these grim sort of pictures just sort of Cuckoo's Nest type thing. But if you look again at the history of mania but hydrotherapy is one of the most consistent using water in various forms either forceful water or are people being put in tubs for very long periods of time. And so while was certainly recipient of that so he had Thorazine. The antipsychotic medications later on in the 1950s which worked well for him but again didn't prove it didn't keep his illness from coming back but treated the symptoms when he was sick and abuse for alcohol for a while and then lithium so lithium as you can see you can see the kind of relentless nature of his illness and in some of those years he had maybe two or three hospitalizations.

[00:37:39] So there's only one bar that's there because this yearly bar. But you can see that it was quite consistent about bipolar illness is it in the first several years of the illness. Generally unless it's made worse by certain medications people will have a relatively free time early on in the illness much longer periods of of wellness between the first second and third episodes and then it just takes on a relentless course and it's in that sense a very progressive illness. So what you can see is law ahead. Of typical if very severe form of that then when he was put on lithium in 1967 which was very early in this country for lithium treatment not early for for the Europeans but very early for America. You can see that with the exception of one very short hospitalization 1970. He was very he was free of hospitalization for years and then in 1975 he had was acutely toxic. He took too much lithium and got very sick very delirious had to be hospitalized and he never quite got back on the right dose after that. And so toward the end of his life he he was having recurrent episodes but Lowell was convinced that lithium had saved his life and was deeply indebted to it for for keeping him out of the hospital what someone said was that he showed him the bottle of lithium capsules.

[00:39:19] Had I heard what the chose salt deficiency. Lowell referred to in a salt deficiency. This had been the first year in 18 he hadn't had a manic attack. There had been 14 or 15 of them in the past 18 years his face seemed smoother.

[00:39:34] The weight of distress attacks in this patient both gone and then just I want to talk a little bit about the relationship between there's a long section in the book on character and I think Lowell had an extraordinary will and iron discipline that allowed him to get back into relationships and back into life and back into teaching facing his students again facing everybody he had been awful to trying to make amends. And just getting back to work he was extraordinarily disciplined man but he was interested in why was it so many poles of his generation seem to die of suicide or of madness. Several of his friends fellow poets were going in and out of hospitals writing to one another in and out of hospitals.

[00:40:38] So he said I feel the jagged gash with which my contemporaries died. There's personal anguish everywhere we can't dodge it and shouldn't worry that we're uniquely marked and Fred it must somehow keep even tempered amused and in control. John Berryman and his bad wait keeps talking about something evil stalking us poets the bad way to talk.

[00:40:58] But there's some truth to it. Lowell wrote a lot about that and he also wrote a lot about what he saw as the relationship of over and over again with his doctors that the early stages of mania allowed him to generate a great deal of material that was original and later useful and changed the course not only of his own poetry but of American poetry. But he also generated during that time a great deal that was not there was hopelessly useless. And when he was depressed he and normal he revised a great deal and he would come back work it over and over and over again. And what Lowell emphasized among other things is that the darkness and light were not metaphors for him. They were life. They were what he was and what his mind was.

[00:41:54] And his work during this time I've had five manic depressive breakdowns short weeks of messianic Rollo B stills glow when I have to be in a hospital the dark months of indecision emptiness. So the dark and light are not mere decoration and poetic imagery but something altogether lived inescapable even survival has had to be fought and fought for.

[00:42:19] One of the things that Lowell I mean I've to say I've I first got introduced to law when I was 17. He's been with me sense but I've taught residents using locals for poetry and his prose writings because I think there's no one in the little English language that talks about the particular kinds of despair and terror and mania and madness that Lowell does. I mean there's something about having somebody who's so incredibly articulate and who's been to the absolute depths of hell to come back and write about it as he did. So I mean this is a great gift starter Walston who is still alive and who remembers Lowell 50 years later very very well.

[00:43:14] And she said almost explosive in his Alpers of energy always accompanied by verbal hyperactivity sometimes to the point of acute breakdown the immediate manic illness is in the light of great extent of poetry. He suggests the desirability of psychosis as a qualification for great artistry.

[00:43:34] What you see in Lowell's hospital records again and again is not just his observations but his doctors documenting and trying to document the relationship between his poetic out put and his his mania in the early stages of mania and then the effects of depression. So obviously I spent quite a bit of time trying to work through all the and I'm just I'm not this is a detail but just to say that the literature backs this up that there's a huge literature. This is just there's much more recent literature than this is a summary if you look at the expected rate in general population there of depression. Or mania or bipolar illness you'll see that in the artistic populations you see very much elevated rage in bipolar populations. What's been happening in the last 10 years is much more systematic scientific research on this and much larger sample sizes these are all very small sample sizes and more recent size literally ranged from studies at 30000 people to one point four million people looking at psychiatric hospitalizations for mania for schizophrenia for autism for depression and looking at the

relationship to creative professions and other measures of academic achievement and finding a very much elevated rate consistently in bipolar rose a lot of reasons very much elevated rate of suicide as well. This is low about the time he had just gotten out of the hospital. For his great mania and great writings of of life studies. So this is a book of poetry that is usually compared to the wasteland and to TSL it's of just having transformed poetry.

[00:45:45] And this is as you can see this is him looking fraught with an awful time in his life but artistically very successful.

[00:45:57] But I do want to end on talking just again about discipline and iron will and the fact that you know a lot of people get manic who aren't creative and therefore they don't get more creative they just get more manic and annoying to most people. They it's the people who have already the creative ability who then get hit by this extra bolus of something that really changes things around fundamentally and then have the capacity to hammer it into shape.

[00:46:38] And this from his friend and fellow poet she was eating the molten stuff of the psyche ran hot and onstage but its final form was as much beaten as poured the cooling ingot was assiduously hammered.

[00:46:54] This is I liked this feature for a lot of reasons but one of them is that this is so contrary to what people think of as raving madness right. I mean it's just one of those. People just have conceptions that you know is not your ordinary people or just who who become wildly insane. I mean this is somebody who this was not long after a manic episode and he's back to work. So just let me just end on this and then get back to the end of my end.

[00:47:30] This is why I took the title of the book to be it can you reading myself like thousands I took just pride and more than just struck matches that brought my blood to a boil. I memorized the tricks to set the river on fire. Somehow I never wrote something to go back to.

[00:47:59] And I suppose I'm finished with wax flowers and I've earned my grass on the minor slopes of Parnassus. No Honeycomb is built without a bee adding circle to circle. Cell to cell the wax and honey of a mausoleum this round dome proves its maker is alive. The corpse of the insect lives embalmed in honey is that its perishable work live long enough for the sweet tooth bear to desecrate this open book.

[00:48:40] My open coffin. May return to too low and end to the fact that love had talked about his writing about the Civil War he had talked about his great uncle who was the grandson of Harriet Lowell who was insane died insane and the eighteen hundreds.

[00:49:10] And this this great uncle of his.

[00:49:15] He wrote a poem about him and he had been shot his horses had been shot and killed twelve of them under him and the thirteenth horse his great uncle realized it was a mortal wound.

[00:49:35] He asked what of his men to strap him into the saddle so he could get back on his horse.

[00:49:40] Fight for a bit before he died.

[00:49:45] This was the ancestor that Lowell always said he wished he had known and so he wrote about this getting getting backup literally into the saddle again.

[00:50:00] So Valor was a subject that Lowell returned to time and again it was critical to his view of society and himself character the struggle to master the difficult the impossible. The determination to persist not to squander time or gift a set course toward a true north. These were what mattered Robert Lowell new civic valour sixteen times and more he had been down on his knees and madness he said sixteen times and more he had gotten up he'd gone back to his work and enter back into life he had faced down uncertainty and madness had created new forms when pushed to stay with the old had brought back imaginative order from chaos it was a different kind of courage. The civic courage and the rules of engagement were unclear Lowell's life as his daughter observed was a messy one. Difficult for him. For those who knew him it was live with iron and often with grace. He kept always at the front of his mind what he thought he ought to be. Even when he couldn't be in believed in what his country could be. Even when it wasn't he worked hard as arch my book. Begins in Cambridge in 1845 as his great great grandmother was taken by carriage to McClain asylum for the insane it ends in Cambridge in 1978 with a memorial service held for Lowell at Harvard Memorial Church in March a foot of snow lay on the ground outside the church and the wind blew to the bone. It was winter in Cambridge had the mourners looked up at the bell tower of the church as they left the service for Robert Lowell and that March day they would have seen the bell that tolled for him but they would not have been able to see the words carved into the shoulder of the bell words for the dead. They had been chosen by Lowell's cousin nearly 50 years earlier when as president of Harvard he donated the bell to the college church in memory of voices that are hushed the bell.

[00:52:21] In memory of the dead.

[00:52:24] The voices of the living could be hushed as well. Lowell's great great grandmother had lived a silent death and madness. Her son has said that only as much of her remained as the hum outliving the hushed Bell the poet's voice speaks for the dead the hushed the valorous it signifies the hours reminds of death. It gives depth and resonance to blithe times solace in the dark the bells cry.

[00:52:56] Come come home Robert Lowell Roach. Come.

[00:53:00] I bell thee home. Questions.

[00:53:10] Yes. The question was that I had mentioned that shock therapy was still being used. What about lithium and Thorazine. Thorazine not so much because their medications that have fewer side effects work probably better. Lithium remains the gold standard of treatment. There are other drugs for bipolar. But these the clinical science is pretty clear that the most effective mood stabilizer for

Bipolar illness is lithium. Lithium has no profit margin whatsoever because it's not patentable. So as a result there are a lot of other drugs that have sprung into being with a lot of advertising campaigns none of which have the track record of working as well in terms of preventing episodes. The other thing that Lithium has and now not everybody responsibility. Not everybody can take it not everybody will take it but it's remains the gold standard. It also is extremely effective in preventing suicide and so the the death rate from Bipolar illness is high and there have been probably 45 or 50 studies looking at the reduction in suicide rates on lithium. So this is another major consideration with the drug.

[00:54:43] The question is is can solitary confinement trigger hypomania and mania. I don't I don't know that there are studies or that there may be. Certainly it's the sort of situation aside from the general inhumanity of it which is up there you know.

[00:55:08] Deprivation of light and deprivation of company are, and stimulation are terrible for anybody. Deprivation of light for somebody with mood disorders. I suppose not all solitary confinement is depriving people of life but a lot of it is depriving people of light who have mood disorders is particularly problematic. I deal with the question is in addition to the very considerable amount of mental illness in extending out of the Lowell's side of the family and extending out on the Spence trail side of the family a huge amount of mental illness. Was there any in more recent generations under Lowell. Lowell is an only child. And you know I deliberately did not look into the current generation. I didn't want I mean I felt like it you know this is a it's an a remarkably intrusive business. Being a biographer is it's not what I really you know decided I ever wanted to do with my life. I wanted to write about Robert Lowell's so I didn't want to be intrusive and I didn't originally have any intention of asking for the psychiatric records. It was it sort of evolved in the course of things.

[00:56:30] So I interviewed his daughter who's perfectly normal and wonderful.

[00:56:39] You know to get information about her father. But I really deliberately didn't ask about yes I couldn't. The question is are the issue is that people who write about their mental illnesses are often people who are privileged enough. I would say not just in terms of the social class or education or finance but often because of family support or because they respond very well to treatment. Ok. So I mean I occasionally get landed on for for this and the fact of the matter is I. I can't be anybody but who I am. I mean you know you can either keep quiet and do nothing and say nothing because you know that people are going to say well you had all this advantage well I did have advantage I had really. I would say my primary advantage is that I had really extraordinarily wonderful mother you know and that is a privilege that's not financial but it's it's privilege. And so I think all these these issues come up as you if you look at the history long history of memoirs long before the current 60s or 70s they're by and large written by people who are upper middle class upper class.

[00:57:57] That's that's the way of it. And I hope that increasingly people have more access to treatment and who have more access to education and writing. You know.

[00:58:12] You know but it's it's one of those things that I but I do believe also that people I think Robert Lowell part of the problem. Robert Lowell had in terms of reputation was because of his privilege.

[00:58:25] You know I think he got a huge amount of envy and resentment because he was perceived of being a Lowell from Massachusetts. You know that didn't get him. I mean he he could have lived off a trust fund and he didn't you know and but the very fact that trust fund is even mentioned is enough to irritate the bejesus out a lot of people. And you know I don't know how you get around that. I mean again he could have done a lot of other things and he didn't.

[00:58:55] I think that from my point of view it's just wonderful when people talk about it wherever they go. And however they do it you know from

[00:59:04] All different backgrounds. Yes.

[00:59:08] The question is did did loaf find it relatively easy to enter back into life and express remorse and have people accept his apologies. I think it's very very complicated because I think that yes he got back into life. But yes he paid a huge toll his reputation plate paid huge toll. He was he. He would say things. I mean this is one of the things he's written about very extensively in the clinical literature is what people the kinds of things that people say when they're manic they say awful things. You know that's just true and anybody who's been around mania knows that that's true that people they just have it's you know their papers literally about going for the jugular you know clinical papers labeled going for the jugular.

[00:59:57] Now if you're a great poet and you are insightful and have a wicked way with words you know it's all very well or if you're one of his wives and you hear about he comes to you and says I'm in love with some 20 year old Harvard student and it's all over the place and it's public. It's one thing to know that it's a clinical symptom it's another thing to live with it. So of course it was difficult. And of course it was very very hard. And I think everybody worked hard at it you know. But it doesn't mean that was that was in any way easy because it wasn't. And that's that's the thing. I mean you know one of the things I'd try and bring up is what is the moral culpability if you have an illness that you didn't ask for.

[01:00:48] You just got because of the you know the throw of the dice and that illness makes you do things that you would never do when saying it's completely antithetical to who you are.

[01:01:02] And I had this discussion not long ago with a friend of mine who's a pathologist at Hopkins. Very smart guy really wonderful man very compassionate and he said but surely when people say things when they get manic or go insane they are really saying something that they really believe. Right. And I said you know what.

[01:01:22] Ok what if you are on the ICU you're an attending on the ICU and one of your patients is delirious and the patient takes his pair of scissors and goes after a nurse you know to try and kill her

would you say hold that person morally accountable or would you say the person was delirious and you've seen that a thousand times and people do things when they're delirious they wouldn't do well not delirious you know. So it's a very complicated sort of thing.

[01:01:54] And I I don't think that Lowell ever tried to pretend that he could just remorse his way out of things. You know he saw and he he writes about my eyes have seen what my hand did you know he he could see what he was doing. So no it wasn't easy. He didn't just sail back through. I think that's a great tribute to his friendships and to the people who knew him that they tried as hard as they could try to understand. And he tried to. But no a lot of lot of blood on the floor yet.

[01:02:32] The question is did did Lowell have any change in his output when he went on lithium. It's it's a very odd thing. When he went on lithium he went before he was on Lithium. He would have these intermittent periods of great productivity and then he would go five years without writing a book. You know I mean six years seven years. I mean it was very sporadic and he worked on it and he worked on them endlessly but there'll be long periods of time when he got when he was put on lithium.

[01:03:05] He started writing sonnets hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of songs.

[01:03:14] And for which I mean many critics thought this was sort of a deterioration in his work.

[01:03:22] Some people thought it was really interesting but it definitely was different. And it was almost like the engine was going steady on but muted.

[01:03:36] And it's a very odd phenomenon. I had these great big forums trying to plot out every poem when it was written and so forth and it just got hopelessly complicated and I figured you know just. But it is an extraordinary sort of thing. I think people feel differently about his work toward the end of this life which is when he was on Lithium. I think many of us think his last book was an unbelievably heartbreakingly beautiful book. Day by day. Others felt like it was the the technique and whatever it was not nearly in the same league as his early. Just out of balsa old blue kind of originality. He wrote two poems the last summer of his life. That. Are just unbelievably beautiful. I mean I think acknowledged by everyone it's just. And they were the last things he wrote. So it's it's hard to know. It's really hard to know the effect of it. I mean what you can say is I think it saved his life. I don't think he would have been around if he hadn't been on lithium. And I think he he felt that and I think it gave him the hope to write because his illness was it was the thought of its coming back was so demoralizing Ok.

[01:05:08] We're wrapping it up. Thank you.

[01:05:15] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.