

Biography Clearinghouse Interview with Jenn Bryant

Jen Bryant ([00:03](#)):

Hi, I'm Jen Bryant. I'm an author and I write picture books, biographies and historical fiction, and I am the author of the Orbis Pictus winning book, *Above the Rim: How Elgin Baylor Changed Basketball*.

Donna Sabis-Burns ([00:21](#)):

Hello, I'm Donna Sabis-Burns. I work at the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Indian education, and I'm part of the Biography Clearinghouse group and here to interview Jen Bryant.

Amina Chaudhri ([00:34](#)):

Hello everyone. I'm Amina Chaudhri. I'm a professor at Northeastern Illinois University and a member of the Biography Clearinghouse. We're very excited this evening to be interviewing Jen Bryant, author of *Above the Rim*. Jen, we just learned that Elgin Baylor passed away very recently on March 22nd, 2021 at the age of 86 and the media reports and obituaries highlighted his athletic achievements, but they minimized his role as an activist, which in our mind makes *Above the Rim* even more essential as a book that young people need to read. And your past work has featured many artists and other cerebral types. What made you turn your attention to sports and to Elgin Baylor in particular?

Jen Bryant ([01:27](#)):

Well, I agree. I mean, it was a very sad day on March 22nd, but I'm honored and delighted that Frank and I got to work on this book and help in some way continue his legacy, particularly for young people. As I said, I've written a lot of biographies on many different topics. I'm a very eclectic person, so my interests are wide and I've always been a sports fan and sports participant. So I've been active in sports my entire life. So my personal perspective is that I really don't draw a hard line between sport and art and intellect. I never have.

Jen Bryant ([02:12](#)):

I always felt that the whole person benefits from all of those things and they feed one another. So I watched baseball as often as I watch specials on PBS about great writers and poets and all of that. So I have been on the lookout for a while for an artist or for an athlete who had changed their particular game or field in a significant way. And there were many perspective topics that I read about, looked into when one of the books that I was reading was the autobiography of Julius Erving, who was a 76ers NBA player from here in Philadelphia.

Jen Bryant ([03:03](#)):

And in his autobiography, he described a time when he was a young person and he had been out playing pickup football. And he really wrecked his knee to the point where he had to be in a hip to ankle cast. And he was on the couch and really couldn't do anything except watch television. And he saw on television an early NBA game in which Elgin Baylor was flying. And the way he described the scene, it was only two paragraphs in the book, but he obviously had an epiphany and he saw Elgin Baylor and he realized that he was Elgin Baylor was playing this game that he loved as a child, basketball and would play outside on this city playground.

Jen Bryant ([03:55](#)):

He was playing it differently and he was playing it artistically. And at that moment it changed his life. And he says in his biography, I saw what basketball could be. And at that moment I committed myself to

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be like Elgin Baylor. And I thought, wow, that's interesting. And as a biographer is, it's usually something small like that really starts me on that journey. And I started casting a wide net as I always do at the beginning of my research and looking into the life of Elgin Baylor. And I obviously through time learned not only about his early childhood in DC, but also about his later activism, but those really two paragraphs in Julius Erving's autobiography got me started.

Amina Chaudhri ([04:41](#)):

Wow, it's amazing where you can find inspiration when you least-

Jen Bryant ([04:45](#)):

Everywhere and everywhere. You never know.

Amina Chaudhri ([04:47](#)):

That's a great story. I'm going to ask you some questions about your research process next. And the first one is where did you start doing research and what did that lead to?

Jen Bryant ([04:59](#)):

Hmm, well, everyone does their research and writing a little bit differently. Research comes into beginning for sure. But it also comes during, because I think as you write, you find out that you need to know more about certain things and then you don't need to know so much about other things. And then, so you would just as you go so they overlap for me. In the beginning, my method, if you can call it a method is to cast a really wide net. And I just read voraciously anything I can get my hands on. So I read older issues of Sport Magazine, which later became Sports Illustrated. I listened to tape interviews. I watched a lot of footage of Elgin Baylor playing in early NBA games. I read books online. And I'm very environmentally aware, but I like to print things out.

Jen Bryant ([06:04](#)):

And I end up with several large three-ring binders. And so that's so I can underline and write in the margins and interact. So I'm a very tactile person too. And I really get immersed in this person's life, much as a portrait painter would really study someone. And there's so much that never really gets in the book in the end, because as you know a picture book is illustrated. So the artist is also telling the story and the text is fairly spare, but what I've found in doing these books is that the wider I cast my net, and the more I can go into the different aspects of this person's life, easier paradoxically, it is to sort of pick out what is important. Yeah. So I also visited the Naismith hall of fame in Springfield, Massachusetts for several days.

Jen Bryant ([07:07](#)):

And that was wonderful. Thank goodness, pre COVID, I was able to go to the museum. The historian archivist there was very helpful, sent me things beforehand, helped me do some research while I was there and then sent me things afterwards. So that museum really helped me get the larger context of the early NBA and to understand Elgin's critical role in being one of the early NBA black players in the early NBA and the league was slowly integrating and the challenges that came with that. So it was very, very good for sort of a macro context of basketball.

Amina Chaudhri ([07:52](#)):

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Hmm. Wow. Could you talk please about the role of non-written sources in your research, such as photographs, films, radio clips, and such.

Jen Bryant ([08:03](#)):

Sure. Particularly there was a sportscaster who interviewed Elgin Baylor and there was a fairly long audio interview and it was through the Library of Congress that I accessed it. And in that particular interview, Elgin spoke an awful lot about his early childhood in DC and what it was like. And he used phrases like his older brothers would dig under the fence because it was a white's only basketball playground, but he talked a lot about messing around and playing around. And there was a type of artistic freedom to the way he organically came to the game. And that struck me as something that was so different than today with kids that we buy them the complete uniform and they go to practice and it's certain times, and the parents stand there and watch. This couldn't have been more different.

Jen Bryant ([09:10](#)):

And so that was interesting to me. And he talked quite a bit about his early childhood in DC. So that was always very helpful when you can get something like that, particularly because when you're writing for young people, you want to fill in those gaps about the early years. And I have to say the film footage of which there was quite a bit, both at the Naismith hall of fame and online that the L.A. Lakers have it, University of Seattle has it where he went to school. It was addictive to watch him play because if you know anything about the arts, Martha Graham changed modern dance forever. He was like that. Watching him was so very different. It was almost as if he was playing in an entirely different game because the game was very horizontal. The people in the court were very skilled, but he just played literally at another level. And he was so gifted and such a good student of the game that he was basically unstoppable. So it was almost hard to communicate that in words, how different and how good he was in his time.

Amina Chaudhri ([10:31](#)):

Wow. You talked a lot about this enormous process and how so much of your research didn't even end up in the book. So what was your biggest challenge in doing the research?

Jen Bryant ([10:45](#)):

Yeah, for me, and again, this is... I've been doing picture book biographies for a few decades now. And for me, it's always keeping everything organized so that I know where exactly to find it. So for me, that's another reason that I ended up having those three ring notebooks, because I can kind of visualize physically where it is and which notebook that I read that information. Whereas if it's on my computer, obviously it doesn't mess up my desk that much, but it's often, "What did I name that file? And how many different sub files should I make?" And to me, it's easier to organize things in hard copy.

Jen Bryant ([11:31](#)):

So I would say keeping all of the research organized, and I do it in a very low tech way. Aside from the notebooks, I have tote bags. So, I had issues of ... here it is ... Autobiography there and marked the page where that particular passage was. Any books that I read that had Elgin Baylor in it, I have in hard copy. So, the office gets crowded, but that's always my biggest challenge really.

Amina Chaudhri ([12:11](#)):

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That's the fun part of the process, right?

Jen Bryant ([12:15](#)):

Yeah, it is. It's fun. It is fun.

Amina Chaudhri ([12:17](#)):

Was there anything that surprised you during your research?

Jen Bryant ([12:23](#)):

Yes. Again, it was a strange irony because so many, I found interviews where so many NBA players of the modern era referenced [inaudible 00:12:42] on viewed Elgin Baylor as a role model, not only in activism, but also in how they played. So you have people like Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant, they're modeling their games really after the first man to play above the rim who was Elgin Baylor. And yet there was this strange void in terms of the fans that so few people understood Elgin's contribution to not only the artistry of flying above the rim, but also his early activism and what a difference that had made. So there was a real distinction between the players viewing him as so critical to the history of the game and to the history of civil rights. And yet very few fans recognize his name. So that was the most surprising thing, that difference.

Amina Chaudhri ([13:43](#)):

Yeah. That speaks volume, isn't it?

Jen Bryant ([13:45](#)):

Yeah.

Amina Chaudhri ([13:46](#)):

When it gets out, it might have questions.

Jen Bryant ([13:48](#)):

Yes, it does. And to an earlier point about technology, he played really before the NBA was really big on television. So that definitely played a part. In that, there was no social media and television, NBA wasn't that big. So that's a big part of it, lack of technology.

Amina Chaudhri ([14:12](#)):

Yeah. Thank you Donna, over to you.

Donna Sabis-Burns ([14:15](#)):

Awesome. Well, I could sit and listen to just, wow. You're wowing me every moment. The research part is, it just sounds so inviting. We're going to turn right now to the writing process. So switch gears a little bit. And we wanted to ask when crafting the biography, how did you decide what to include and what not to include?

Jen Bryant ([14:39](#)):

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Hmm. Well, first of all, I'm really glad that you used the word decide because I think in, when I do workshops with all ages, young folks, middle grades, high school up through adults who want to write for young people. I feel like the decision making is really not talked about that much and there is a lot of decision-making too. It's constant decision making at the art as well from the cover to every single [thread 00:15:16] there are thousands and thousands of decisions for every book. So that's a really important thing to think about. And I think that's what surprises people who come to writing that there isn't any automatic answer that they find themselves at a crossroad, like every five minutes, but that's normal as a writer or an artist.

Jen Bryant ([15:39](#)):

That's what happens. But for me again and this is just how I work. I think of my biographies as sort of long narrative poems. So I try and metaphorically leave the door wide open in the beginning. And I just write, I probably write four or five times as much as eventually gets into the final manuscript. And so I don't consciously think about age groups. I know that sounds strange, but I don't. Once I've amassed all that research, I concentrate on the language itself and try to use that research in the most beautiful, lyrical, but accurate language that I can.

Jen Bryant ([16:29](#)):

And I just go for it. I don't really think, but remember, you're writing for a young person that never consciously enters my mind. So in that way, I think the lyricism that sort of characterizes my biographies is given free reign. And I don't kill it off too early. And concentrate on the language then the language takes me where I need to go. And those refrains and those passages where I'm describing how he moved or how he felt, then I allow them to rise organically. So again, it's kind of a strange paradox I'm actively writing, but I'm also staying out of the way, if that makes any sense.

Donna Sabis-Burns ([17:18](#)):

No, it does. Absolutely. So I want to tap back into that decision piece and talk about how did considering your reading...[sic]... Your readers, I'm sorry, help in those decisions in terms of creating historical context and developing a thread throughout Elgin Baylor's life?

Jen Bryant ([17:38](#)):

Yeah. Well, I think probably it's a subconscious thing. I mean, I think most folks who write and illustrate for young people have their own young person inside them very accessible. So the things that are interesting to my inner young person, I'm pretty sure it would be interesting to my young reader. I think, again, the choice in the language, for instance, there's a part in the book where people are watching what he does and they want to know, they want, they want an answer. How do you do that? Where did you learn that? Right. So there's the logic part playing. And his answer to that is, I don't know, it's spontaneous, which is kind of the answer I'm giving you about the writing. It is, but it also isn't. And I think it's probably a valuable metaphor.

Jen Bryant ([18:46](#)):

And again goes back to the fact that for me, one of my pet peeves is that people tend to put individuals in boxes. You're either an athlete or you're an intellectual, or you're an artist. Why not all three? Why not? I think it's valuable to be able to blur those lines. And I think the paradox of how great he was is that he worked so hard at it. Right. And I think in writing too, if you get a flow as you have those days when things are just flowing and then you come back to it a few days later and you say, "Huh." That

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description about him going to the rim and defying the defense and the way he moves. I finally got that right. It seems to emerge spontaneously as his above the rim shots did, but the reality is there's thousands and thousands of hours of practice behind it. So, yeah, I think that probably answers it the best I can.

Donna Sabis-Burns ([19:57](#)):

That's great. So when you're talking about finding those special moments, please talk about the refrain people stopped what they were doing and watched. When I read myself the first time, I honestly got goosebumps and so rich with possibility. What were your thoughts at the time of writing that made you include that?

Jen Bryant ([20:21](#)):

Well, again, I think probably a neuroscientist can explain where that came from, it's not really a conscious thing. I think probably the work that went into watching all of that film footage and watching people watch him. And then also hearing people interviewed about Elgin, his coaches, his players, they would say, well, whenever Elgin was on the court, I would just find myself putting the ball on my hip and just watching. Right. I mean, because he was so different. They knew that a part of the game's history was being made in front of them. It was almost an act of reverence. Right. So it's challenging to try and capture that in mere words, because when you see the films, it can be daunting to think what ha how am I going to explain how beautiful and how different that is. But you try and you try and you fail, but then you capture a few things that seem to work like that phrase.

Jen Bryant ([21:29](#)):

So again, I really think it's just all of that research, all of the watching and listening and reading. And then when you come to the page and you're crafting your manuscript, that's all there. So you've done that work. And it's just a lot of experimentation. And as you said earlier, decision-making. I might have four or five phrases that work okay. And, I know as an experienced biographer, sometimes it's at my desk, I'll cross out two that day, but I'll come back the next day. And then one will kind of jump out at me and I'll say, "Yeah, that one." Right. So learning to be patient with my own process as part of that also.

Donna Sabis-Burns ([22:14](#)):

Oh, that's great. And when you talk about your descriptions, you include a very vivid description of the racism that Baylor experienced while he traveled to the NBA. And it's likely that the reality was much worse. What is your process when thinking about how to present the harsh realities of life to a young audience?

Jen Bryant ([22:39](#)):

Yeah. Well, I have a quote behind me there and that in that little blue framed picture is from E.B. White. And he says, "Anyone who talks down to children is wasting their time. Anyone who writes down to children is wasting their time. You have to write up." And I think what he meant by that is that children are so honest, right? They see clearly. They haven't learned to hide their deepest feelings or their fears. And they know the world is there's good and bad in the world. So I honor that. There's a big difference between leaving it out or sugarcoating it and, say, going on 18 pages about something that's really horrific. So you need to include the truth of a person's life there. And in the case of Elgin Baylor, obviously he had those experiences where he was turned away, simply because of the color of his skin.

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Jen Bryant ([23:51](#)):

But I think as an author for young people, it also is part of the truth. It is a hopeful story, because what he did then is go through that process and say, "This isn't right, I'm a human being." And he did. With such grace and simplicity. That's the thing. "I'm a human being. I'm on the team and I deserve to be treated like one." And the simplicity of that act and the sitting down, in his suit and not in the uniform and getting the commissioner's attention and right away, the authenticity of that act, I think, meant so much. And I think I saw a young person's needs. I mean, they see clearly that connection.

Jen Bryant ([24:42](#)):

Obviously, if I'm writing an adult biography of those repetitive events, a few had happened in Carolina before then, there would be conversations there isn't room to do that in a picture book biography. You have to really home in on the, almost shine a light on just those aspects that reveal his really courageous character. Yeah. So, and I mean, I did a biography of Horace Pippin in 2013. He was shot by a sniper while he was in a trench in world war two and Melissa, the illustrator, did a beautiful job of capturing that moment. And you don't want to take that out five, six, seven pages, but you don't need to. If you capture that one moment correctly. And again, I mean, I think kids understand the world a lot better than sometimes we give them credit for so, yeah.

Donna Sabis-Burns ([25:43](#)):

Well, I think you captured that beautifully and the artistry that went along with it certainly did as well.

Jen Bryant ([25:50](#)):

Yeah, Frank is amazing.

Donna Sabis-Burns ([25:52](#)):

Oh yes, absolutely. One question about your writing. And this is a great question I want to ask. If there is one question you hope to get across to the kids who experienced this story, what would it be?

Jen Bryant ([26:10](#)):

Oh boy, well, I have another quote over my desk from the poet, Nikki Giovanni. And she says, "Writers don't write from experience, they write from empathy." And I hope that young readers who come to *Above the Rim* will not only learn about Elgin Baylor because you do learn things from reading with nonfiction and they won't only enjoy the story, but they will have empathy for his situation. I mean, I think that's why I do what I do. I think that's probably why you guys do what you do. And I think that's what we're all trying for. And in this particular time, when there is a lot of athlete activism reaching out toward other people and trying to help everyone understand and walk in one another's shoes. I think he's a perfect role model for that.

Jen Bryant ([27:19](#)):

So that's what I would hope. I would hope that they would have empathy for... And I think children are subject to injustice quite a lot. They're not in control of their lives. So the big people are in control. And I mean this in the best of households and families, but children have to go along when they're being brought up. And I believe if you write well enough that a young person can really understand what it's like to feel treated as less than you are. And I think that's what the story tries to share.

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Donna Sabis-Burns ([28:04](#)):

I completely agree. Thank you for that. Now I'm actually going to switch it back to Amina to ask the last question. Thank you so much.

Jen Bryant ([28:17](#)):

Sure.

Amina Chaudhri ([28:24](#)):

I was muted. You shared so much about this wonderful book and we know that the kids who read it will get a real full sense of who he was and what his life was like, and be able to make connections with current activists and athletes and other folks who are doing important work. And what have we not asked you? Is there something else about the writing of this book or the entire process that you'd like to share with us?

Jen Bryant ([29:00](#)):

Wow. You guys asked wonderful questions, really, really wonderful questions. And I've been talking quite a bit about this book, so thank you. I mean, it's wonderful to have to think about some of these things more in depth, but I've got another interview. So I guess what I would mention also that we haven't really touched on is that sometimes when people see a book and they see a basketball, "Oh, it's a basketball book." Well, certainly there's basketball in it as you well know, but I think young people who don't like basketball, don't like sports, or don't consider themselves to be in the realm of sports, either as a fan or an athlete. I think it's an important story. And I think it's one of the best things that they could read right now in our time, because Elgin Baylor was both humble and courageous.

Jen Bryant ([29:57](#)):

And what he did in January of 1959, is going on all around us today but he was the first. He was the very first to boycott a professional game because of racial injustice. And I feel privileged to be able to tell his story. I know Frank does too. And to be able to elevate into his name and to celebrate his life for young people. Whereas, if the book didn't exist, there wouldn't be a lot of people who didn't know his contributions either on or off the court. So it's the book that has sports, but you don't have to love sports in order to love Elgin Baylor.

Amina Chaudhri ([30:40](#)):

Thank you. I'm going to stop the recording now, and then we can chat for a bit before we say goodbye.

Jen Bryant ([30:45](#)):

Sure. Thank you.

Amina Chaudhri ([30:47](#)):

Thank you very much.