

National Poetry Month

Is reading poetry a blessing or curse?

"Writing a poem is a kind of possible love affair between something like the heart (that outrageous but also shy factory of emotion) and the learned skills of the conscious mind. Or, they make appointments with each other but are casual and often fail to keep them..." - Mary Oliver, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award

"In poetry, there are no casual readers." - Theodore Roethke, poet, teacher, Pulitzer Prize winner

By David R. Altman
Books & Writers Editor

According to *The Poetry Foundation's* survey of 1,000 Americans, breaking them into two groups, those that currently read poetry and those that don't - less than five percent of us could recall either a favorite poem or a favorite poet.

What about these famous lines: "No man is an island" or "Do not go gentle into that good night" or "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood." I'm sure those sound familiar, but many of us don't remember who wrote them (here's a hint: John Donne, Dylan Thomas and Robert Frost). "Oh, yes, that's right!" I can hear many of you saying.

What about your favorite poets? Most of us grew up reading or listening to the poems of Robert Frost or Emily Dickinson or Edgar Allen Poe, or perhaps Rudyard Kipling or Walt Whitman. Those are some of the greatest poets of the 19th and 20th centuries and they were often "required" reading.

But what about modern-day poets? How many of us have read the beautifully simple poetry of the great Nebraska poet Ted Kooser or the memorable verse of W.S. Merwin? Most people have never heard of them. They are both former United States Poet Laureates and both winners of the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. Most importantly, they are both still very much alive!

And how about Canton's David Bottoms, Dalton's Marsha Mathews and Jasper's own Clifford Brooks, poets we've high-

lighted here in the *Progress* during National Poetry Month; each of them extraordinarily gifted writers. But it is unlikely many of us will ever read their wonderful poems (although I encourage you to, otherwise, you risk never being exposed to something important; that is, new voices that will reach you in new ways).

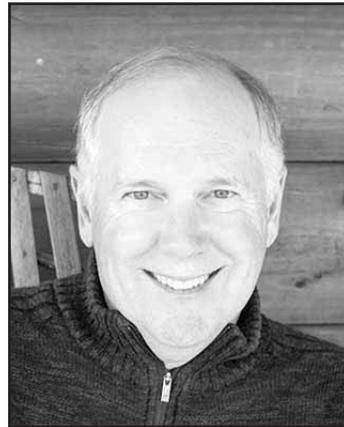
Contemporary poets suffer the unfortunate curse of simply being contemporary. They are arguably writing poems at a time of great historical disadvantage - when the world is driven more by a 24-hour news cycle than it is by people having the time to read great new poetry. Very few of us have Frost or Auden or Yeats reading their poetry on our iTunes playlists (yes, I do).

The fact is that most people remember the poetry that they learned from either a teacher or a parent. We grew up on the 'classics' - the poems that were taught to us in high school (Wordsworth, Tennyson, Langston Hughes, T.S. Eliot or, maybe, e.e. cummings); or, poets that were read to us at a younger age (like Shel Silverstein, Lewis Carroll or Theodor Seuss Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss).

As someone who has enjoyed reading poetry since the age of 17, when I wrote my first poem to my high school sweetheart who is now my 'wife sweetheart' of 40 years, I find reading poetry is as compelling (and comforting) as it has always been. Great poetry inspires and motivates. It communicates something that can be communicated in no other way.

Seamus Heaney, the great Irish poet and Nobel Prize winner who passed away last summer, said that the poet's words "...stand smiling at the audience's way of reading them and winking back at the poet's way of using them." I love that.

However, W.H. Auden, in his eulogy to Yeats, said that poetry "makes nothing happen...it survives in the valley of its mak-



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ing."

But Auden, whom I believe was the greatest of the English poets, was often cynical and negative about the writing of verse, although his poetry was profoundly memorable - a feast for the mind and the heart.

I saw Auden do a reading at Agnes Scott College in 1971, just two years before he died. I was a college freshman at Georgia State who had read his poetry between classes and even memorized one of his poems (he had influenced me, like the great writers do, with only his words).

To see him amble out onto that stage in a jammed but eerily quiet auditorium of students and poetry lovers, his voice still strong and his verse unforgettable, made me realize that writing poetry was something I would do as long as the Lord would allow. To this day, I have vivid memories of that night - much like we all do of a concert or performance that never leaves us and serves either to confirm our dreams or push us toward some new direction.

All great poetry lifts us, even when it saddens us or inexplicably takes us to place we have never been. If we allow it to, it helps us to see things just a little more clearly. It connects us.

Frost said once that "poetry begins with a lump in the throat." I think he was right.

While the inspiration for verse comes deeply from within, trying to communicate through poetry is another thing altogether. It is what separates good poets from great ones. The great ones you keep reading over and over.

What makes good poetry? Is it the sound, the rhyming, the meter of the verse or the (different?) messages it conveys to each reader? Or the feeling it creates? The place it takes you? The kinship it invites? Maybe all of these.

One thing is certain - good poetry is as highly subjective as a good movie. Your idea of which film should win the Oscar will most likely be different than mine.

And if I say Auden or Bottoms or Mathews or Brooks and you say Frost or Dickinson or Shakespeare or Whitman, it doesn't really matter. Because, in the end, the true gift of poetry is that we can both be right.

Dave Altman's first book of poetry, Death in the Foyer, is scheduled to be published by Finishing Line Press this September. Altman is the Books and Writers Editor of the Progress. He and his wife Lisa have a cabin on Sassafras Mountain.

Dessert

With small hands and sticky fingers, the child
Reaches upward, squealing with anticipation,
He awaits the treat his big sister is already enjoying.
His plastic spoon thumping the grungy highchair, his
Words unclear but intentions unmistakable.
Sister, doll baby in tow, hums a tune from pre-school
As mother sits texting and father checks his scores.
The dog, left out again, whines and paces
As the final bites, snatched by tiny fingers, disappear.

- David R. Altman