

For National Poetry Month - Poet David Bottoms

“Obviously, the only reason to write poems is because you enjoy it. You certainly don’t do it for the money or the celebrity. Young writers sometimes have silly ideas about this. That’s why I try to drill into them the dangers of false ambition. The only good ambition, of course, is to write something you like.”

- David Bottoms, Georgia’s former Poet Laureate and one of the nation’s great contemporary poets.

By David R. Altman
Books and Writers Editor

David Harold Bottoms was first exposed to poetic language in the mid-fifties at the Canton First Baptist Church “...in the wonderful imagery in those old Baptist hymns and the beautiful and antique language of the King James Bible. This is where I first experienced language as art.”

Like other poets featured in our series, he also believes that poetry is more than art.

“Basically, the message I’ve taken from poetry is this. There is only the one life - the one life with infinite variations. We all share that life - we’re born, we aspire, we struggle, we search for meaning, we die. Poetry is the art of the metaphor, which is the art of making connections, the art of discovering bridges,” Bottoms wrote several years ago. “Poetry’s great message is the message of commonality, of our fundamental humanity, the significance of being a human creature at our particular moment.”

In 1979, Bottoms won the prestigious Walt Whitman Award from the American Academy of Poets for his book, *Shooting Rats at the Bibb County Dump*. The judge for Whitman award was the famous author Robert Penn Warren, the only person to have ever won Pulitzer Prizes in both poetry and fiction. Penn Warren called Bottoms “...a strong poet, and much of his strength emerges from the fact that he is temperamentally a realist. In his vision, the actual world is not transformed but illuminated.”

Bottoms has met with widespread acclaim throughout his career with well-known poet



David Bottoms

Jane Hirshfield, whose work has been selected for seven editions of Best American Poetry, says Bottoms “... is quite simply one of the best poets writing today.”

He once told his students at Georgia State that “...a poem at its most fundamental level is a piece of communication. Otherwise, it would be a diary.”

Bottoms, who at one point was the Hugo Poet in Residence at the University of Montana, was also close friends with the late author James Dickey, mostly known for his book *Deliverance*. But Dickey was also a prolific poet. Bottoms has that said many of his contemporaries felt that Dickey set the true standard among contemporary Southern poets.

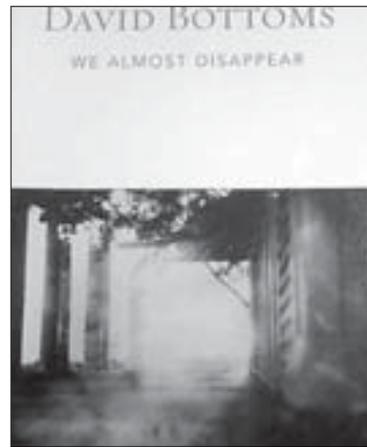
“Without poetry, without art, I think we’d generally be much poorer spiritually.”

The poet is a lifelong baseball fan who also played guitar and hung out with the Allman Brothers Band when he was an undergraduate student at Mercer in the late sixties.

The Canton native also called being a poet a “...dangerous profession.” He said “...the writer who is also a seeker must learn to move by faith across dangerous terrain, to trust in his or her own hidden strengths, to nourish them, to apply them in artful ways in our search for meaning.”

Many of Bottoms’ poems are about animals and the natural world. “Animals fascinate me because the real world is the wilderness. Everything else is artifice.”

Bottoms won many other awards and honors for his work,



including fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation.

In 2000, Gov. Roy Barnes appointed Bottoms as Georgia’s Poet Laureate and he is a 2011 recipient of the Governor’s Award in the Humanities. He the author of nine books of poetry, including *We Almost Disappear*, and two novels. Bottoms currently holds the Amos Distinguished Chair in English at Georgia State University.

Here is Bottoms’ poem “Under the Vulture-Tree” from his book *Armored Hearts* published by Copper Canyon Press.

Under the Vulture-Tree

We have all seen them circling pastures,
have looked up from the mouth of a barn, a pine clearing,
the fences of our own backyards,
and have stood amazed by the one slow wing beat,
the endless dihedral drift
But I had never seen so many so close,
hundreds,
every limb of the dead oak feathered black,
and I cut the engine, let the river grab the jon boat
and pull it toward the tree.
The black leaves shined, the pink fruit blossomed
red, ugly as a human heart.
Then, as I passed under their dream,
I saw for the first time its soft countenance,
the raw fleshy jowls wrinkled and generous,
like the faces of the very old who have grown to empathize with everything.
And I drifted away from them,
slow, on the pull of the river,
reluctant, looking back at their

roost,
calling them what I’d never called them,
what they are,
those dwarfed transfiguring angels,
who flock to the side of the poisoned fox,
the mud turtle crushed on the side of the road,
who pray over the leaf-graves of the anonymous lost,
with mercy enough to consume us all
and give us wings.

[Editor’s note: As part of April’s National Poetry Month, the Progress will be featuring the work of Georgia poets. National Poetry Month is a month long celebration of poetry established by the Academy of American Poets.]

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