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Poet Laureate: Kathryn Stripling Byer shares her vision for her term

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Ancestral voices called poet Kathryn Stripling Byer to Western North Carolina in 1968.

Her attention to living voices - neighbors, fellow poets - has led to an important recognition: her appointment as North Carolina's poet laureate this year. She is the fifth poet to assume the post, and the first woman. She follows Fred Chappell, who served for five years, 1997-2002.



Kathryn Stripling Byer

The current state guidelines define a two-year term. "Fred gave 250 readings over five years," Byer says. "He really raised the bar. If you're going to shoot for that level of involvement, two years is a wise choice."

In her first book, "The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest," Byer depicted herself coming from "a mean and starved corner of backwoods America," her crabbed youth behind her "like gnats singing."

Snapping her fingers while walking down the road, the girl contemplates the poetry of her father's pig auctions, her grandfather's sowing and her grandmother's laundry. She dreams while stuffing sacks with pecans, indulged by her mother.

Byer's paternal grandmother died in Georgia while longing to return to her mountain home. Byer followed her trail of memory to Cullowhee, where she found her husband, Jim, an English professor, and an abandoned house, which inspired her second book, "Wildwood Flower."

"I began to think what it would be like to live in a place that small way back in the woods," Byer says. "I heard the voice. Things started coming together. One day it

occurred to me - this woman is Alma. Once I had a sense of her, I let her loose with quilts, fire-building, frost."

Living in the mountains, reading its literature and communing with both ancestral and contemporary spirits led to Byer's remarkable collection of ballad-inspired poems, "The Black Shawl." Byer had moved past the girl of the harvest and had developed a way of becoming a variety of characters and voices.

Ever exploring territory beyond the boundaries of poetry ("the imagination belongs to all of us, you can't put a fence around it," Byer says), Byer turned to a collection of photographs by Louanne Watley to compose her fourth book, "Catching Light." She imagined herself the photographer's subject, Evelyn, grown old, looking at her own images.

In the same volume, Byer meditates on death and taps Spanish and gypsy traditions she loves ("The Black Shawl" featured the gypsy lover). She identifies with Frida Kahlo, who "doted on skeletons," and she dwells on cities of graves "with the pictures of lost children." The poems anticipate her next book, "Wake," a meditation on 9/11.

"Wake" also inspired a collaboration with musicians, for along with the chapbook, Byer produced a CD in which celloist David Moore plays preludes composed by Harold Schiffman to accompany Byer's reading. Pursuing other artistic paths, Byer has recently combined with novelist Isabel Zuber, author of "Salt," to present a program that combines poetry and fiction; and with Nina Bagley to include book arts. It's unlikely that a few months will go by without a revelation about another one of Byer's explorations.

In the midst of Byer's poetic harvest, she actively supports other writers. The governor presented her with the North Carolina Award for Literature in 2001. Cynthia Barnett, executive director of N.C. Writer's Network, calls Byer's participation in the writers' community legendary.

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Q&A with Kathryn Stripling Byer

Question: You have been named North Carolina poet laureate? What do you plan on doing?

Answer: In general, the poet laureate participates in events, writes celebratory poems and acts as a mentor to other writers. Debbie McGill at the N.C. Arts Council suggested I come up with a metaphor to organize my two years.

Q: That's a poetic idea.

A: We've talked about other things as well. The council will have a Web site for me. I will want to involve as many North Carolina poets as I can to show the range of work being done. I'll have interactive features. People will be able to send in poems and get responses. I think I'll write a monthly column, taking on certain issues of language and looking at poets' work... I also think it would be fun to write a renshi, a Japanese form, in which one poet starts a poem and a second poet takes the last line and starts another poem. We'd send it all around the state. You'd have this trailing vine of poetry.

Q: How have your goals as a writer evolved?

A: When I started out, my goals were very self-involved - to get my work done and published. The older I've become, the more I've felt part of a community, with a responsibility to it... It matters less who gets an award, and it matters more that the interests of literature are served, that we encourage a diversity of American voices. We're caught up in this view that we're separate from the rest of the world, and separate one group from another.

Q: Is there a very big audience for poets?

A: Booksellers say that there's a steady audience. "Poets and Writers" magazine said that poetry presses such as Louisiana State University have had their most successful years yet. The challenge for a post like this is to increase that audience. Every reading that I give is an opportunity... Readings are crucial. I've seen way too many poets botch readings as if they're not interested. Every workshop should take time to teach how to read a poem well.

Q: You've had a lot of experience with this through your teaching, haven't you?

A: I like writing assignments that use others' poets' poems. I'll find a poem that I like, such as Simon Ortiz's poem, "That Time," a poem about getting ready to go to dance on a reservation. It concludes, "That was that time." He's telling a little story. I ask people in workshops to write about one time.

Q: So, they write a little story and let's say they don't mess it up by trying to get fancy. How do you help them give it sound? Because your poems sing.

A: A poet has to feel that surge of rhythm. I'm wrestling with the conclusion of a poem now, and I know I haven't found the rhythm. What drives me crazy about a lot of contemporary poetry is that it has so little of that music. It is so prosey... I would urge students to start reading their poems aloud, start dancing around, playing with syntax, until they get some energy in their poems, start having some fun.

Q: In your poems, it's not just a good sound you're searching for, it's certain voices.

A: When I moved to the mountains, I was still in the process of writing about my childhood in southwest Georgia... After several years of living here, the place began to seep into me. It took a lot of listening. I made some important friends, and I listened to them...Linda Mathis...Willa Mae Pressley... all of this resonates. When I began to write in the voice of Alma (the persona in "The Wildwood Flower"), it enabled all of these stories to come bubbling up... I had been trying to write as myself with a poetic eye.

There was always a sense of distance. But with this particular voice, talking about quilting and wildflowers was natural.

Q: I know you feel a sense of urgency about the threats to our society and our world in these times. Can you find a voice for that?

A: In a poem I wrote that was published in "Atlantic," I was working with a mother's voice. I take up the issue of civilian casualties in Iraq. It started from reading an account in a newspaper about a mother wailing over her daughter, decapitated by one of our bombs. At that time, my daughter was safe. She was involved in translating the Urdu poet, Ghalib. One of Ghalib's poems ends with the image of one of his beloved. Each of our beloveds is precious to us. It transcends politics.

POEM

"Full Moon"

(from "The Black Shawl")

Full moon says look I am
over the pinebreak, says give me
your empty glass, pour
all you want, drink, look
out through your windows of ice,
through the eyes of your needles
observe how I climb, lay aside
what you weave on your looms

and see clouds fall away
like cold silk from your shoulders,
be quiet, hear the owl coming back
to the hayloft, shake loose
your long braids and rise up
from your beds, open
windows and curtains, let light
pour like water upon your heads,
all of you women who wait, raise
the shades, throw the shutters
wide, lean from your window ledge
into the great night that beckons
you, smile back at me
and so quietly nobody can hear you
but you, whisper, "Here am I."