

Writing a career

By Sarah Kucharski • Staff Writer

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Having spent most of her writing career largely removed from the public eye in Cullowhee's rural, but academic mountain community, Kathryn Stripling Byer is unaccustomed to her surge in publicity since being named North Carolina's newest poet laureate.

The calls, the emails, the interviews haven't stopped since last Thursday (Feb. 24) when the announcement formally was made.

"It makes my comforter feel so much more comfortable when I crawl up under it and pull it over my head," Byer said.

Byer has written four poetry collections since 1986, including 2002's *Catching Light*. A regular cadre of friends, family and fans has welcomed the release of each book, but now it seems the entire state is watching.

"There's no comparison," Byer said. "I'm hoping that this will subside."

Appointed for a two-year term (see related story), Byer follows in the footsteps of fellow Western North Carolinian Fred Chappell. Chappell, born in Canton and now a teacher at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, was the state's poet laureate from 1997 to 2003.

Chappell bore a dogged determination to accept nearly every interview, make each requested appearance and write almost all the poems that were commissioned. The schedule was non-stop. In the end, he had about 250 poems written for specific occasions, Byer said.

"I'm happy to do some, but I don't think I want to take on that many," she said.

Rather, Byer will be part of a new generation of laureates who utilize the Internet and the press to communicate a message. Byer said she plans to develop a Web site, which will include projects designed to bring poets together and introduce the work of up-and-comers. Another tentative concept is for a column about literature and language to appear in newspapers across the state.

“Beyond the poetry is just my interest in trying to engage the public in a realization or a dialogue about the importance of language and using it well,” she said.

Though Byer has always been artistic, her interests first lay with the visual. In college she enrolled in a drawing course and her professor strongly encouraged her to continue on with the program and become an art major. However, a good creative writing class focusing on the traditional themes in sophomore British lit won out.

Byer began writing fiction and poetry, going on to earn her MFA at UNC-G, where poets like Chappell, Robert Watson and Allen Tate were her professors. She and her fellow students quickly earned a reputation around campus.

“We were a wild and wooly bunch,” Byer said. “The department head called us ‘the exotics’.”

After graduation, in the fall of 1968, Byer got a job teaching freshman composition at Western Carolina University — the following year she was not asked back. Newly married and unemployed, Byer stayed home and wrestled with her poetry.

“I spent my days, I can still see it, in the little kitchen in the first house where we lived,” Byer said. “When I started, I had the time to really just bury myself in the poetry, aside from just going to the grocery store, feeding the dog, whatever. After I had our daughter that changed.”

In the late 1980s, Byer became the poet-in-residence at Western, teaching poetry workshops and serving as advisor to the school's literary magazine, The Nomad. She left the position about 10 years later, in need of the freedom to help care for her aging parents.

Now, at age 60, Byer still works around family obligations but carries her work with her.

"Poetry's very portable," she said. "I carry a lot of notebooks around and have them handy whenever I can. I always have a poem going."

The poems usually begin with a sense of rhythm building up and images turning into words.

"The rhythm seems to be the groundwork that I really have to have," Byer said.

But the process is simply one of waiting, as even the laureate herself may stumble into writer's block, Byer said, explaining how a recent afternoon's nap was dedicated to mulling over a particularly tricky ending.

"I've having a hell of a time finding the right word to end the poem with," she said.