

Dog-Eared

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How does a Southern girl from a family of farmers grow up to be a distinguished poet?

Kathryn Stripling Byer talks about her beginnings as a writer, her musical influences, domesticity and the writer's role in politics.

A native of southwest Georgia, Kathryn Byer lives in the mountain community of Cullowhee, N.C., and was named North Carolina Poet Laureate in February 2005. She is the author of four collections of poems: *Catching Light* (2002), which was nominated for the Los Angeles Times Book Award in Poetry and received the Southeast Booksellers Association Best Book of the Year in Poetry Award in 2003; *Black Shawl* (1998), which won the Roanoke-Chowan Award and Brockman-Campbell Award; *Wildwood Flower* (1992), winner of the Academy of American Poets' Lamont Poetry Prize for the best second book of poetry; and *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* (1986).

Byer has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and North Carolina Arts Council, and was recipient of the North Carolina Award for Literature in 2001. Her essays and poems have been widely published. She earned a bachelor's in English from Wesleyan College in Macon and a master's in fine arts from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Cecilia Woloch: Do you remember when the impulse to write, to make poems, first arose in you?

Kathryn Byer: Not specifically. I was always full of the landscape around me, I suppose you might say, and responding to it, whether through just standing and trying to really feel it or trying to draw it. I liked



Photo by Chris English

being alone and wandering around the farm; I had my favorite vistas, as I liked to think of them. And then I began to enjoy reading poetry in my English classes when I was in public school. I was good with words, not with numbers. Numbers were slippery, words were solid. I could diagram sentences but couldn't do equations.

Anyway, I didn't become serious about writing till I was in college and had a wonderful writing class my sophomore year, with springboards that encouraged me to leap off them into my inner life, which I guarded carefully.

CW: How anyone becomes a poet is anyone's guess, but for a young woman from rural south Georgia, from a family of farmers, to go off and become a poet seems about as unlikely as any scenario I can conjure of a writer's beginnings. What poets and writers were you exposed to early on, or what poems and stories? Was it the sounds of words, their rhythms, that first drew you

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in, or was it the desire to put words to what you saw, the unnamed, the unspoken — in other words, to address some silence — that made you want to write?

KB: Cecilia, I think your comment about addressing some silence is terrific. And right on target. It has to do with my comments earlier about trying to find a way to respond to what was calling to me, what caused me to stand still at the edge of a field and be silent and attentive, let's say. To reciprocate. A dialogue, a conversation. Although Southerners are known to talk a lot, there's a lot that lurks underneath the saying, both light and dark, and that was waiting for me to claim it, I think. And to make my own mythology of the family stories I heard or inferred from what I did hear. I was a rather withdrawn child and I liked to stay on the edge of things and listen. I didn't say much. I didn't really need to or want to, though there was always that push to be vivacious, to have "personality," to be a "belle." I was none of that in my youth.

Still, I felt myself in the center of the universe at times and that I had to make a promise to it, that I would be true to it in some strange way, that I would not forget it and trusted that it would not forget me. And yes, I did love Wordsworth when I discovered him in high school English.

Anyway, I was exposed early on to lots of talk, lots of stories — no television then, so we talked a lot, and much of that talk was African American talk. There was a black woman who helped raise my brother and me, Willie May Jackson, and her voice I'm sure is embedded in my neurons! And we had black playmates. African-American speech is right there in the center of my Southern voice. I've heard white Southerners blab on and on about what makes Southern sound the way it does and never once mention black speech. Amazing! But perhaps that's where some of the rhythmic impulse comes from in my work.

CW: When I first heard you read your work in public, I was struck by how musical your reading was — I found myself closing my eyes and swaying in rhythm to the words as you read. And I've heard that you recently collaborated on a CD with some musicians. So what would you say is the relationship between music and language in your work? Do you ever listen to music as you compose poems?

KB: I will never forget turning on the Doors' Strange Days full blast and writing poems, trying to break out of a block of some sort, when I was in grad school. And it worked. I needed something wild like Morrison and his bunch to loosen me up... I've listened to a lot of music throughout my life, always loved it. I can recall the thrill of discovering Spanish music when I was in high school, sitting by the window listening to Malaguena, and then being turned on by flamenco guitar and gypsy dance. And when I came to the mountains, there was the high lonesome sound of the ballads waiting for me. Oh lord, and good fiddle-players. Yes, the mountains were full of good story and good old haunting songs. There's an ecstatic quality to singing that remains important to me. I want my poetry to come as close to that as possible.

CW: One of our most iconic Southern writers, Eudora Welty, has been quoted as saying that, to be a writer, one must live a daring life. She also said it was possible to



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lead a daring life without ever leaving one's room. A lot of contemporary writers travel far from their beginnings, become exiles of one sort or another — James Joyce even implied it was necessary to become an exile to write; other writers have implied that it's necessary to go far from home to look back and write about home. But you've been living for a long time in a landscape that seems to speak to you with immediacy and urgency. You've also drawn from the landscape of your childhood in Southern Georgia for your poetry, which seems to me haunted in a way that's maybe peculiarly Southern. How would you describe the relationship between the landscape in which you live and your inner life, your poetry? Do you think that Southern writers, in general, have a stronger attachment to the landscape of home?

KB: I've been thinking a lot about this lately, the relationship between the inner and the outer landscapes. I believe that we must honor both landscapes, that artists today simply must serve as examples for how to do that, especially the honoring and cleaving to the beloved landscape in which they live at present and the one that they grew up within. Southerners claim that they have a unique sense of place, and I'd like to challenge Southern writers to make good on that in our current political landscape, which is one that threatens a barbaric destruction of place.

The bedrock of my psychic/poetic landscape is Southern; there the sun rises and sets on a

coastal plain field, most of the time a cornfield, and the live oaks rise up out of the mist every morning.

CW: I recently heard the poet Maxine Kumin give a talk called "Women Writers: Refuting the Charge of Domesticity," defending women poets from the attack male poets, such as Roethke, have made on them as "stamping a tiny foot against God." As a woman writer who has also been a wife and mother, what would you say in response to Roethke's accusation, were he still alive to be confronted? Do you think Southern writers are "ghettoized" for their attraction to the ancestral, the personal, the feminine, the domestic?

KB: Oh, I once loved Roethke. How disappointing of him to discount women's work in such a way, especially since he was such a feminine voice in his sensitivity to nature and his desire to merge with it, not destroy it. I don't know if I would even try to refute the charge of domesticity, since I don't consider it a "charge," and any man who considers it such has not thought deeply about what being alive means. How could it be a diminishment to celebrate the hearth where one gathers with the people one loves and nourishes and by whom one is nourished?

Yes, I do indeed think Southern writers, particularly poets, are "ghettoized." I am always astounded by how few of us make it

into anthologies, major reading series or get any critical notice to speak of outside the South. I myself have been attacked for writing from my regional/rural landscape, as if I must divest myself of this attachment to be taken seriously by readers who live in condos in Atlanta or Chicago or New York City.

CW: I've thought of you as a fairly private poet, living in a kind of holy seclusion in those mountains, able to keep above the fray of "pobiz" and tap into the deep well of your own experience for your creative work. Now that you've been named poet laureate of North Carolina, you've been thrust — or so it seems to me! — into a very bright public spotlight. How do you think that might affect your work as a poet? Do you envision using your role as poet laureate to make a less marginal place for poets and poetry in the larger culture? In an ideal world, what would the public role of the poet be?

KB: Holy seclusion, oh my! The years I chafed at being here, longing for the literary lights of Chapel Hill and Durham! Now I am so glad not to be living in such places.

Being named poet laureate has been both exciting and disorienting. I feel the conflict between public and private spheres keenly now. As for my work as a poet, I've discovered real pleasure in writing occasional poems, something I hadn't anticipated. At the same time, the more personal work sits in notebooks and boxes, waiting for me to come back to it. Claiming time for that will be a major challenge.

I would love to be able to use my role to make poetry less marginal, and we are working on several projects at the moment to try to do that. One involves using current technology, interactive TV, for example, to bring poetry to the public schools around the state. We have a website, ncarts.org, that features a poet of the week, and notable books by North Carolina poets. During April, we featured a poem a day.

In an ideal world, our poets would sing our stories back to us, connecting us through language that's memorable, moving, often disturbing; our poets would through their poems urge us to awaken and look around us, fall in love again and again with the things of this world.

CW: A lot of poets now hold fairly comfortable positions in academic institutions. Do you think this has any effect on the kind of poetry they produce? Do you think poets are less willing than they might otherwise be to speak out, in any public way, on the controversial issues of the day? What do you think the role of the writer should be when it comes to social and political issues?

KB: Yes, I do think poets are less willing than they might otherwise be to speak out; like most Americans, they have become comfortable, eager to move up the career ladder with their MFA degrees, their NEA fellowships, their Guggenheims and what have you. We have a vast MFA industry in this country today, and it has taken on a corporate voice to my ear, at least. That is, a sameness of language, a language that often carries no emotional or personal seriousness, no engagement with the world beyond the workshop circle. It seems a closed universe sometimes. And yet when writers do speak out, they are often castigated by the media. Look at Susan Sontag, Barbara Kingsolver, Arundhati Roy — some of the vicious attacks leveled against them, as if they are only supposed to write fiction or essays and not use their voices to speak out against war and environmental destruction.

CW: In recent years, you've written and published a number of passionate editorials and letters to the editor, and been otherwise active and vocal about social and political issues, and progressive causes. What issues are most important to you? Have you encountered much criticism for the stands you've taken? Do you foresee having to temper your activism, now that you have an "official" role, or could you imagine using the laureateship to bring wider attention to the issues that concern you most? Might that be dangerous in these divisive times? What risks would you be willing to take?

KB: At the top of the list, of course, is the environment, because ultimately that will be the issue that confronts all of us, the degradation and destruction of the earth we stand upon. I see this country taken over by corporate interests, a political culture that doesn't give a damn about anything but its own power, and a growing fascist response to any dissent.

I fully intend to bring matters of language, including the political misuse of language, to my public discussions. I have already drafted two columns in what will be called *Language Matters*, that we hope to send around to newspapers across the state and have on our website. One of them focuses on Sen. Saxby Chambliss' use of "towel-head" when he told Valdosta, Ga., Law enforcement officers that he wished they'd arrest every "towel-head" that crossed the state line. So yes, I intend to take on issues like this as they involve the use of language. As for the risks I'd be willing to take, I guess I'll just have to find out.

CW: If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you live? What would the landscape be like, and the architecture? What kind of community would you gather around yourself? On what kind of values would the culture be based? Which season would last the longest?

KB: Oh my, this should be a poem! And maybe the poems answer to this better than I can. The landscapes of my dreams —when I remember them, that is — tend to be full of light, Navajo sandstone blazing in the sun, the earth alive and humming with color and texture. Distance calling me, the "faraway nearby" as Georgia O'Keefe called it. The architecture would be simple and spare, open to sky and mountains; the season that lasted longest, the beginning of autumn, harvest time, perhaps because that is the time when the veil between worlds is most sheer, according to Celtic belief. The visionary time, the poet's time, the seer's time. The culture would be based on good food, flourishing gardens, enough time to sit and talk and drink wine, watch the landscape change as the sun moves, listen to the birds, realize how blessed we are to live on this earth. As Ed Abbey said, this earth is too good for us, and yet we dare to whine about our human state and long for a heavenly home. Well, our home, paradise, is right here, and that is the value above all others that I would wish to base my life and my community upon.

*Cecilia Woloch is a poet, writer and teacher who travels widely and maintains homes in California and Kentucky. Her most recent collection of poetry, *Late*, was published by BOA Editions in 2003.*