



POETRY FOR THE PEOPLE

BY
KITTY JOHNSON

“THE WRITING AND READING OF POETRY is the sharing of wonderful discoveries,” according to Ted Kooser, U.S. Poet Laureate and winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

Poetry can open our eyes to new ways of looking at experiences, emotions, people, everyday objects, and more. It takes us on voyages with poetic devices such as imagery, metaphor, rhythm, and rhyme. The poet shares ideas with readers and listeners; readers and listeners share ideas with each other. And anyone can be part of this exchange. Although poetry is, perhaps wrongly, often seen as an exclusive domain of a cultured minority, many writers and readers of poetry oppose this stereotype. There will likely always be debates about how transparent, how easy to understand, poetry should be, and much poetry, by its very nature, will always be esoteric. But that’s no reason to keep it out of reach. Today’s most honored poets embrace the idea that poetry should be accessible to everyone. Many of the top proponents of poetry accessibility are Poet Laureates; indeed, the position of Poet Laureate comes with the mandate to bring poetry to the people.

Ted Kooser is one of those poets. He writes about such so-called ordinary things as cows, stars, screen doors, and satellite dishes. He’s been called an archeologist of sorts because when he writes about everyday objects, he reconstructs the lives of the people who have owned or used them. He says the poet’s job is to put a teleidoscope up to the ordinary world and give it back to the reader to look through. (A teleidoscope is a kaleidoscope with a clear sphere instead of bits of colored glass. When you look through the opening, it makes a kaleidoscopic image from whatever you are viewing.)

U.S. Poet Laureates

1937–1941
JOSEPH AUSLANDER
(1897–1965)

1943–1944
ALLEN TATE
(1899–1979)

1944–1945
ROBERT PENN WARREN
(1905–1989)

1945–1946
LOUISE BOGAN
(1897–1970)

1946–1947
KARL SHAPIRO
(1913–2000)

1947–1948
ROBERT LOWELL
(1917–1977)

1948–1949
LEONIE ADAMS
(1899–1988)

1949–1950
ELIZABETH BISHOP
(1911–1979)

1950–1952
CONRAD AIKEN
(1889–1973)

1952
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS
(1883–1963)

1956–1958
RANDALL JARRELL
(1914–1965)

1958–1959
ROBERT FROST
(1874–1963)

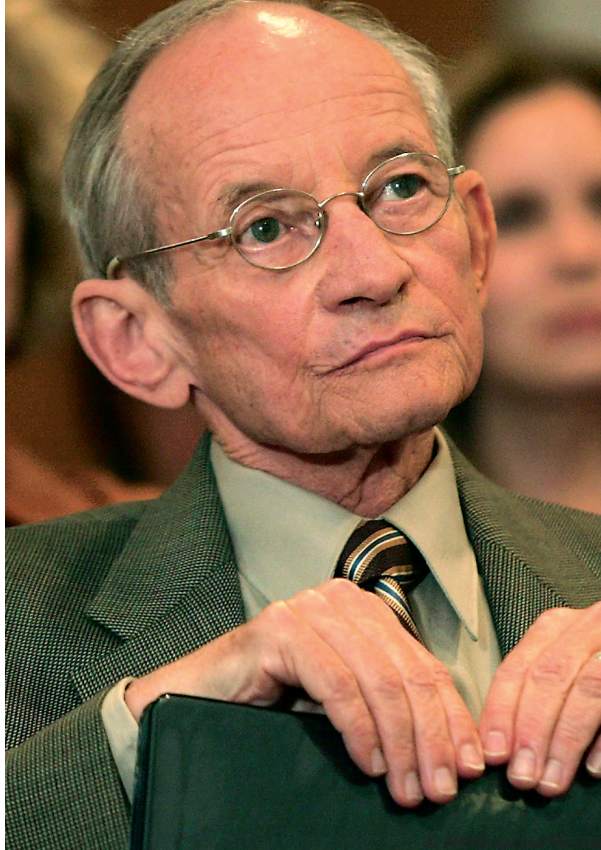
1959–1961
RICHARD EBERHART
(1904–2005)

1961–1963
LOUIS UNTERMAYER
(1885–1977)

1963–1964
HOWARD NEMEROV
(1920–1991)

1964–1965
REED WHITTEMORE
(1919–)

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Ted Kooser

Kooser was born in 1939 in Ames, Iowa. He received his bachelor's degree at Iowa State University and his master's degree at the University of Nebraska. Both Iowa and Nebraska are states in the Great Plains region of America's Midwest, an area often overshadowed by the more glamorous and populated East and West coasts. The Midwest boasts many large cities, but it has more small towns, acreages, farms, and open spaces than cities. Known as America's heartland, the Midwest is associated with agriculture, food production, and family life. Kooser, who refers to himself as a "dutiful Midwesterner," incorporates what many Americans think of as typical Midwestern values into his poetry: common sense, forthrightness, hard work, practicality, morality, modesty, reticence. His writing is known for its clarity and precision, other qualities often associated with the Midwest.

The clarity and precision come through hard working practicality. Like many poets, for many years Kooser held what is known as a "day job," working in an insurance company, eventually becoming a vice president. He got up early every morning to write before going to work at the insurance office. He often showed his poems to

his co-workers, and if they found a poem difficult to decipher, he would rewrite it because he didn't want to be a poet who is difficult to understand. He says he has never completed a poem in one draft: he often writes as many as 30 or 40 versions before he feels a poem is ready. "I stand for the kind of poetry that the everyday person can understand and appreciate," he said at a recent poetry reading.

Now Kooser is retired from the insurance company and lives on an acreage near Lincoln, Nebraska, with his wife, Kathleen Rutlege, who is the editor of a newspaper, the *Lincoln Journal Star*. With 11 collections of poetry to his name, Kooser teaches as a visiting professor in the English Department at the University of Nebraska and still gets up early every day to work on his poems.

In addition to being named Poet Laureate of the United States, Kooser has also received many other honors, including fellowships in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Pushcart Prize, the Stanley Kunitz Prize and a Nebraska Arts Council Merit Award. Kooser won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for his book *Delights and Shadows*.

Kooser is currently serving his second term as U.S. Poet Laureate. During his first term, he gave more than 70 interviews and made more than 100 personal appearances to read and talk about poetry. He also invited poets and a singer-songwriter to the literary series at the Library of Congress to read and discuss poetry, including the poetry of song lyrics. In addition, he initiated the program "American Life in Poetry," a free column for newspapers, which features a poem by a living American poet with an introduction by Kooser. The column, which can be found online at www.Americanlifeinpoetry.org, reaches tens of thousands of readers. Kooser says he plans to continue the column after his tenure as Poet Laureate has ended.

Librarian of Congress James H. Billington praises Kooser as a "major voice for rural and small town America and the first poet chosen from the Great Plains. His verse reaches beyond

his native region to touch on universal themes in accessible ways.”

You can read Kooser’s biography, watch and listen to video clips of readings and interviews, and read pieces of selected poems on his website: www.tedkooser.com.

Some Facts about Poet Laureates

What is a Poet Laureate?

A poet laureate is an eminent and representative poet of a country or region. The title itself comes from an early Greek and Roman tradition of honoring exceptional poets, war heroes, and athletes, among others, with a crown made of branches from the laurel tree. The laurel tree was sacred to the Greek god Apollo, patron of poets.

The first English language poet laureates, beginning with Ben Jonson in 1616, were salaried members of the British royal household who composed poems for national occasions or for court, the King or Queen’s formal assembly of councilors and officers. When William Wordsworth was appointed Poet Laureate in 1843, the office became a reward for artistic eminence.

The position of Poet Laureate is much newer in the United States. Although an Act of Congress created the title of “Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry” in 1986, the position had existed from 1937 until 1986 as “Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.”

Local poet laureates are becoming increasingly popular; in the United States, there are a growing number of state, regional, and even municipal poet laureates.

How long does a U.S. Poet Laureate serve?

The appointment is for one year, and runs from September to May. Quite often the term is extended for a second year. Robert Pinsky served three terms, from 1997 to 2000.

How is the Poet Laureate chosen?

The Librarian of Congress appoints the national Poet Laureate. In order to make a selection, the

Librarian consults with the outgoing and former poet laureates, as well as poetry critics. Committees of local poets often choose local poet laureates on the basis of artistic excellence.

Does the Poet Laureate get paid?

The U.S. Poet Laureate is paid a stipend of \$35,000. The stipend is funded by philanthropist Archer M. Huntington (1870-1955), who was most well known for founding the Hispanic Society of America. Local poet laureates are paid, if at all, on a much smaller scale.

What does a Poet Laureate do?

The Poet Laureate gives an annual lecture and reading of his or her poetry and usually introduces poets in the annual poetry series at the Library of Congress. He or she also advises the Library of Congress on its literary program and recommends new poetry for the Library’s Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature. In addition, according to the Library of Congress website, the Poet Laureate “seeks to raise the national consciousness to a greater appreciation of the reading and writing of poetry.”

Local poet laureates are also out there raising the level of awareness about poetry. For example, in 2001, James Baker Hall, a creative writing teacher, became poet laureate for the state of Kentucky. As a teacher, he knew that intellectualizing about poetry and other arts is not the same as experiencing them. During his tenure, he advocated a greater presence of artists in schools to give students a chance to actually talk to artists, instead of only learning about their works.

Jose Montoya, a recent Sacramento, California, poet laureate, advocated literacy and sought to make poetry accessible to everyone, regardless of their ages or cultural and educational backgrounds. Montoya writes about life in the barrio (a Spanish-speaking community or neighborhood in the United States). He co-founded an artists’ collective known as the Rebel Chicano Art Front, which became known for community activism as well as its murals and posters. A Sacramento, California, TV station referred to Montoya as an ambassador of literary arts.

Some Poet Laureates of the Past Two Decades

Many national Poet Laureates have contributed to making poetry accessible to everyone. The efforts of some of them are described below. (The years they served as U.S. Poet Laureate appear in parentheses.)



Maxine Kumin

MAXINE KUMIN (1981–1982) gave poetry workshops for women at the Library of Congress. Kumin writes not only about such universal topics as starvation and war but also about the inner life of women, friendship, family relationships, and rural life in New England. Many of her poems are based on her childhood experiences. She was a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets for four years but resigned, along with fellow poet and chancellor Carolyn Kizer, as a form of protest over the limited number of poets of color in the academy.

GWENDOLYN BROOKS (1985–1986) brought poetry classes and contests to inner city elementary schools to help kids “see the poetry in their lives.” She was active in the poetry workshop movement. Influenced by her own experiences in both segregated and integrated schools in inner city Chicago, she believed poetry is for everyone, not just the elite. The first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize (in 1950 for her poetry collection *Annie Allen*), Brooks wrote poems on topics that included family life and day-to-day

survival in the ghetto. She was poet laureate of the state of Illinois from 1968 until the time of her death in 2000.



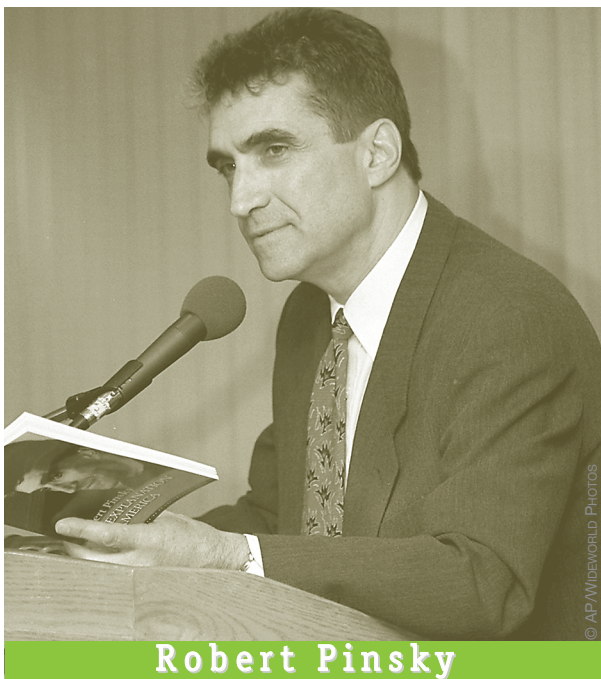
Gwendolyn Brooks

JOSEPH BRODSKY (1991–1992) advocated wider distribution of poetry. His idea was to place books of poetry in public places where he hoped people would read, enjoy, and share poetry. A young author named Andy Carroll joined forces with Brodsky in 1993 to create the American Poetry and Literacy Project (APLP), which distributed donated copies of Joel Conarroe’s anthology *Six American Poets* in motel rooms. This volume included works by Langston Hughes, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Emily Dickinson. Since it began, the project has distributed more than a million free poetry books to schools, supermarkets, hotels, hospitals, airports, zoos, waiting rooms, truck stops, and other public places across the United States. The project even convinced some publishers to print poems in telephone directories.

Other free poetry giveaways from APLP included Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Raven and Other Favorite Poems* for Halloween, and *Great Love*

Poems for Valentine's Day, and an anthology *Across State Lines: America's Fifty States as Represented in Poetry* for National Poetry Month in 2003. APLP also partnered with the Academy of American Poets to edit, produce, and distribute 15,000 copies of an anthology of poems as part of a Read-a-Thon project for 10- to 14-year-olds. This project encourages reading poems and writing about them. The APLP is supported entirely by volunteers and donations.

RITA DOVE (1993–1995) brought writers together to explore the African diaspora through the eyes of its artists. With the Library of Virginia, which serves as the library, archival, and reference agency of the state, she produced *Shine Up Your Words: A Morning with Rita Dove*, a one-hour television show about poetry, featuring elementary school children. She also brought poetry, jazz, and readings by young Crow poets to the Library's literary series. From January 2000 to January 2002 she wrote a weekly column, "The Poet's Choice," for the *Washington Post* newspaper. Dove is currently Poet Laureate of the Commonwealth of Virginia.



ROBERT PINSKY (1997–2000) founded the Favorite Poem Project. The project announced

that it would accept nominations of favorite poems for a period of one year. During this time, 18,000 Americans submitted their favorite poems, which were then collected into three anthologies. The project continues to accept additional submissions for its database. According to the project website, www.favoritepoem.org, the response demonstrates the relationship between democratic culture and poetry. Pinsky is also the poetry editor of a weekly web magazine, *Slate*, where readers can click on a link to hear a poem read aloud by its author.



BILLY COLLINS (2001–2003) brings poetry to American high schools through *Poetry 180*, www.loc.gov/poetry/180, a Library of Congress website that offers a different poem for every day of the school year. Collins uses humor in his poetry, often as a "door" leading to more serious places. Perhaps this is why he views his poetry as a form of travel writing. Collins characterizes his poetry as being suburban, domestic, and middle class. He writes about everyday objects such as mail order catalogs, used books, plants, among many others, and he likes his poems to have a clear beginning, middle, and end.



The west facade of the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress. © AP/Wideworld Photos

HISTORY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

THE POET LAUREATE'S OFFICIAL HOME is the Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The Center sponsors public readings of poetry and fiction, as well as lectures and other literary events. Although the Center's beginnings date to 1936, the Library of Congress itself is much older.

In 1800, President John Adams signed a bill that established the federal government in Washington (rather than Philadelphia) and created the Library of Congress, along with a Joint Committee on the Library. The Library of Congress was meant as a reference library for the use of Congress only. Its home was the new Capitol Building until British troops set fire to it in 1814. Soon after that, Thomas Jefferson, by then a retired President, offered to replace the burned contents with his personal library of 6,487 books. Because his books were on such a wide variety of topics, some of them in foreign languages, this laid the foundation for a much more inclusive national library. According to the Library of Congress website, the "Jeffersonian concept of universality, the belief that all subjects are important to the library of the American legislature, is the philosophy and rationale behind the comprehensive collecting policies of today's Library of Congress."

The library began growing into a national institution under the direction of Librarian of Congress Ainsworth Rand Spofford from 1864 to 1897. He initiated the copyright law of 1870 requiring all copyright applicants to send two copies of their work to the Library of Congress. Because of the influx of materials in 1886, Stof-

ford, along with Senators Daniel Vorhees of Indiana and Justin Morrill of Vermont, convinced Congress to authorize a competition for a design for a new, larger building. The winning Italian Renaissance style building was designed by Washington architects John Smithmeyer and Paul Pelz.

Construction began in 1888, with General Thomas Lincoln Casey, chief of the Army Corps of Engineers, in charge of construction. His son, Edward Pearce Casey, began supervising the interior work in 1892. This included sculptures and painted decorations by more than 50 American artists. The new library opened to the public on November 1, 1897.

The original Thomas Jefferson Building is now supplemented by the John Adams building, built in 1938, and the James Madison Memorial Building, built in 1981.

Archer Huntington first endowed the Library's Chair of Poetry in 1936, and the Poetry and Literature Center was founded in the 1940s. Its support comes mainly from a bequest from Gertrude Clarke Whittall, who, like many of the Poet Laureates, wanted to make poetry and literature accessible to more people.

Today the Library of Congress houses more than 29 million books in 460 languages, 58 million manuscripts, the largest rare book collection in North America, and the world's largest collection of legal materials, films, maps, sheet music, and sound recordings.

The current Librarian of Congress, James H. Billington, has held the position since 1987.



The Great Hall of the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress.
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Websites of Interest

<http://www.hstreasures.com/articles/poetry.html>

Home School Treasures offers tips on teaching poetry, including basic information about the vocabulary of poetry, ideas for assessment, and links to other ideas for poetry lessons.

<http://loc.gov/poetry>

The poetry page for the Library of Congress provides links to pages about the Poet Laureate, poetry events and webcasts, poetry reference materials, archives of recorded poetry and literature, and other pages of interest.

<http://www.poets.org>

This website of the Academy of American Poets includes poems, essays, and interviews about poetry, biographies of poets, and audio clips of poems read by their authors or other poets. Be sure to click on the "For Educators" section.

<http://www.poetry.com>

The International Library of Poetry offers poetry writing contests, a test of your "poetry IQ," a poem of the day, poetic techniques, advice for rhyming, the greatest poems ever written, and more.

<http://www.gigglepoetry.com/>

This Funny Poetry for Children site offers school poems to read and rate and tips for writing nursery rhymes, fill-in-the-blank poems, and more.

<http://www.poems.com>

Poetry Daily publishes a new poem every day along with some background information about the poet.

<http://www.powells.com/authors>

Find interviews with poets and other authors on this website.

U.S. Poet Laureates

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1965–1966

STEPHEN SPENDER
(1909–1995)

1966–1968

JAMES DICKEY
(1923–1997)

1968–1970

WILLIAM JAY SMITH
(1918–)

1970–1971

WILLIAM STAFFORD
(1914–1993)

1971–1973

JOSEPHINE JACOBSEN
(1908–2003)

1973–1974

DANIEL HOFFMAN
(1923–)

1974–1976

STANLEY KUNITZ
(1905–)

1976–1978

ROBERT HAYDEN
(1913–1980)

1978–1980

WILLIAM MEREDITH
(1919–)

1981–1982

MAXINE KUMIN
(1925–)

1982–1984

ANTHONY HECHT
(1923–2004)

1984–1985

ROBERT FITZGERALD
(1910–1985)

AND

REED WHITTEMORE
(1919–)

1985–1986

GWENDOLYN BROOKS
(1917–2000)

1986–1987

ROBERT PENN WARREN
(1900–1989)

1987–1988

RICHARD WILBUR
(1921–)

1988–1990

HOWARD NEMEROV
(1920–1991)

1990–1991

MARK STRAND
(1934–)

1991–1992

JOSEPH BRODSKY
(1940–1996)

1992–1993

MONA VAN DUYN
(1921–2004)

1993–1995

RITA DOVE
(1952–)

1995–1997

ROBERT HASS
(1941–)

1997–2000

ROBERT PINSKY
(1940–)

2000–2001

STANLEY KUNITZ
(1905–)

2001–2003

BILLY COLLINS
(1941–)

2003–2004

LOUISE GLÜCK
(1943–)

2004–

TED KOOSER
(1939–)