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Ted Kooser is Pulitzer Prize Winner

2005 has been a busy year for Poet Laureate Ted Kooser. On April 7, the Pulitzer committee announced that his *Delights & Shadows* had won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. And, later in the week, he accepted appointment to serve a second term as Poet Laureate.

While many previous Poets Laureate have also been winners of the Pulitzer, not since 1947 has the prize been won by the sitting laureate. In that year, Robert Lowell won—and at the time the position was known as the Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. It was not until 1986 that the position became known as the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.

The 89th annual prizes in Journalism, Letters, Drama and Music were announced by Columbia University. The poetry award honors a “distinguished volume of original verse by an American author.” Finalists were *The Orchard* by Brigit Pegeen Kelly and *Collected Poems* by the late William Matthews.

Retired insurance man puts a premium on verse

by Elizabeth Lund November 16, 2004

—excerpted from *The Christian Science Monitor*

Ted Kooser isn't embarrassed to say that the poems he wrote in grade school were decidedly ordinary: “I love my dog/ his padded paws/ at Christmas he's my/ Santa Claus.” He doesn't try to hide the fact that as a teenager “my impulse toward poetry had a lot to do with girls.” Kooser, a 65-year-old retired insurance executive, even admits to knocking the side-view mirror off his car after being named poet laureate of the United States in August. He was so excited, he says in a phone interview, that he didn't pay attention as he backed out of his driveway in Garland, Nebraska.

Some poets might not mention those stories, cultivating instead a more worldly image. But for Kooser, the first US laureate from the Plains States, ordinary moments are the impetus for art. His poems are like flashlights illuminating small dramas: a father watching his son get married; a tattoo that has faded. The setting may be rural America, but the scene is universal. That resonance, along with his clear, graceful style, have earned him numerous awards. Yet what really makes Kooser a “thoroughly American laureate”—as predecessor Billy Collins has called him—is not just his approach but the way his perspective seems to mirror that of “average” Americans.

“Most of us would prefer to look at cartoons in a maga-

continued on page four: 'Insurance'

Winners of the Pulitzer Prize receive a \$10,000 award.

A professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Kooser's award-winning book, *Delights & Shadows*, was published by Copper Canyon Press in 2004.

“I'm thrilled by this,” Kooser said shortly after the announcement. “It's something every poet dreams of. There are so many gifted poets in this country, and so many marvelous collections published each year. That mine has been selected is a great honor.”

Poetry Daily said of *Delights & Shadows*: “For more than thirty years Ted Kooser has written poems that deftly bring dissimilar things into telling unities. Throughout a long and distinguished writing career he has worked toward clarity and accessibility, making poetry as fresh and spontaneous as a good watercolor. A gyroscope balanced between a child's hands, a jar of buttons that recalls generations of women, and a bird briefly witnessed outside a window—each reveals the remarkable within an otherwise ordinary world.”

In addition to *Delights & Shadows*, Kooser is the author of 10 collections of poetry and prose including *Local Wonders*, *Seasons in the Bohemian Alps*,

continued on page two: 'Pulitzer'

Dana Gioia praises Kooser

... Kooser has written more perfect poems than any other poet of his generation. In a quiet way, he is also one of its most original poets. His technical and intellectual interest may be narrow (indeed, in terms of limited techniques, he shares a common fault of his generation), but his work shows an impressive emotional range always handled in a distinctively personal way. Finally, his work does coalesce into an impressive whole. Read individually, his poems sparkle with insight. Read together, they provide a broad and believable portrait of contemporary America.

—excerpted from “The Anonymity of the Regional Poet,” an essay on Ted Kooser from *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture*.

printed 1992; 2002, Graywolf Press.

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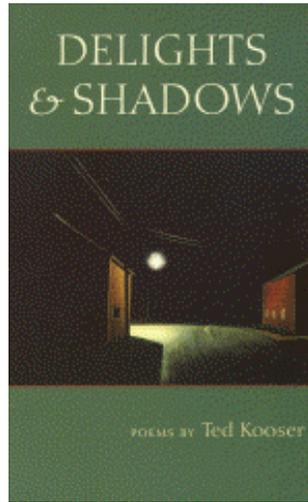
Pulitzer Prize goes to Poet Laureate Kooser

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(2002) and *The Poetry Home Repair Manual* (2005) published by University of Nebraska Press. Kooser was born in Ames, Iowa, in 1939 and attended public school there before earning his bachelor's degree at Iowa State University (1962). He taught school for one year before moving to Nebraska to pursue graduate school. He received his master's degree at the University of Nebraska in 1968. He has lived all of his life in Nebraska and Iowa.

Kooser's other collections of poetry include *Sure Signs* (1980), which received the Society of Midland Authors Prize for the best book of poetry by a Midwestern writer published in that

year; *One World at a Time* (1985); *Weather Central* (1994); and *Winter Morning Walks: One Hundred Postcards to Jim Harrison* (2000), winner of the 2001 Nebraska Book Award for Poetry. *Local Wonders* also won the Nebraska Book Award for Nonfiction in 2003. The book was also chosen as the Best Book Written by a Midwestern Writer for 2002 by Friends of American Writers, and it won the Gold Award for Autobiography in ForeWord Magazine's Book of the Year Awards. He has an upcoming release, *Flying at Night*, a new compilation from University of Pittsburg Press



that will include poems from *Sure Signs* and *One World at a Time*. This new book will be out in 2005.

Kooser is also the author, with his longtime friend Jim Harrison, of *Braided Creek: A Conversation in Poetry* (2003), for which the two poets received the 2003 Award for Poetry from the Society of Midland Authors. Among Kooser's other awards and honors are two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, the Pushcart Prize, the Stanley Kunitz Prize, the James Boatwright Prize and a Merit Award from the Nebraska Arts Council.

Since retiring from the insurance business, Kooser has had more time for writing and has published three books. He teaches poetry and nonfiction writing as a visiting professor at UNL and is on faculty for the Nebraska Summer Writers' Conference. Since his appointment in September as the U.S. Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, he has traveled extensively to readings, events and literary conferences, while attending to his office in Washington, D.C.

He recently unveiled a new public service, the *American Life in Poetry* project. In collaboration with the Poetry Foundation and the Library of Congress, the initiative offers a weekly newspaper column called *American Life in Poetry* free of charge to any paper wishing to carry it. Each 6- to 8-inch column features a poem by a contemporary American poet and a brief introduction to the poem by Kooser.

Poets Laureate listed by dates of service

The following poets have been appointed by the Librarian of Congress to the Consultant position. In 1986 Robert Penn Warren was the first to be designated Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. The Poet Laureate "serves as the nation's official lightning rod for the poetic impulse of Americans. During his or her term, the Poet Laureate seeks to raise the national consciousness to a greater appreciation of the reading and writing of poetry."

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------|------------------------------|-----------|
| Joseph Auslander | 1937-41 | William Jay Smith | 1968-70 |
| Allen Tate | 1943-44 | William Stafford | 1970-71 |
| Robert Penn Warren | 1944-45 | Josephine Jacobsen | 1971-73 |
| Louise Bogan | 1945-46 | Daniel Hoffman | 1973-74 |
| Karl Shapiro | 1946-47 | Stanley Kunitz | 1974-76 |
| Robert Lowell | 1947-48 | Robert Hayden | 1976-78 |
| Leonie Adams | 1948-49 | William Meredith | 1978-80 |
| Elizabeth Bishop | 1949-50 | Maxine Kumin | 1981-82 |
| Conrad Aiken | 1950-52 | Anthony Hecht | 1982-84 |
| William Carlos Williams | | Robert Fitzgerald | 1984-85 |
| appointed in 1952 but did not serve | | Reed Whittmore | 1984-85 |
| Randall Jarrell | 1957-58 | Interim Consultant in Poetry | |
| Robert Frost | 1958-59 | Gwendolyn Brooks | 1985-86 |
| Richard Eberhart | 1959-61 | Robert Penn Warren | 1986-87 |
| Louis Untermeyer | 1961-63 | Richard Wilbur | 1987-88 |
| Howard Nemerov | 1963-64 | Howard Nemerov | 1988-90 |
| Reed Whittmore | 1964-65 | Mark Strand | 1990-91 |
| Stephen Spender | 1965-66 | Joseph Brodsky | 1991-92 |
| James Dickey | 1966-68 | Mona Van Duyn | 1992-93 |
| | | Rita Dove | 1993-95 |
| | | Robert Hass | 1995-97 |
| | | Robert Pinsky | 1997-2000 |
| | | Stanley Kunitz | 2000-2001 |
| | | Billy Collins | 2001-2003 |
| | | Louise Glück | 2003-2004 |
| | | Ted Kooser | 2004-2006 |

Clarity is the hallmark of Kooser's style, with deceptively modest metaphors grounded in the Nebraska landscape. The *Bloomsbury Review* described his work as "like clean, clear water."

—*The New York Times*

Pulitzer Prize: Poetry winners listed

The Pulitzer Prizes were established in 1917 with an endowment from Joseph Pulitzer to Columbia University to recognize significant achievements in journalism, letters, drama, and music. Prizes in letters are awarded for fiction, general nonfiction, history, poetry, and biography/autobiography.

1918 *Love Songs* Sara Teasdale
1919 *Corn Huskers* Carl Sandburg and *Old Road to Paradise* Margaret Widdemer
1922 *Collected Poems* Edwin Arlington Robinson
1923 *The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver, A Few Figs from Thistles, Eight Sonnets* Edna St. Vincent Millay in *American Poetry 1922 A Miscellany*
1924 *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes* Robert Frost
1925 *The Man who Died Twice* Edwin Arlington Robinson
1926 *What's O'clock* Amy Lowell
1927 *Fiddler's Farewell* Leonora Speyer
1928 *Tristram* Edwin Arlington Robinson
1929 *John Brown's Body* Stephen Vincent Benet
1930 *Selected Poems* Conrad Aiken
1931 *Collected Poems* Robert Frost
1932 *The Flowering Stone* George Dillon
1933 *Conquistador* Archibald MacLeish
1934 *Collected Verse* Robert Hillyer
1935 *Bright Ambush* Audrey Wurdemann
1936 *Strange Holiness* Robert P. Tristram Coffin
1937 *A Further Range* Robert Frost
1938 *Cold Morning Sky* Marya Zaturenska
1939 *Selected Poems* John Gould Fletcher
1940 *Collected Poems* Mark Van Doren
1941 *Sunderland Capture* Leonard Bacon
1942 *The Dust Which is God* William Rose Benet
1943 *A Witness Tree* Robert Frost
1944 *Western Star* Stephen Vincent Benet
1945 *V-Letter and Other Poems* Karl Shapiro
1946 No Award
1947 *Lord Weary's Castle* Robert Lowell
1948 *The Age of Anxiety* W.H. Auden
1949 *Terror and Decorum* Peter Viereck
1950 *Annie Allen* Gwendolyn Brooks
1951 *Complete Poems* Carl Sandburg
1952 *Collected Poems* Marianne Moore
1953 *Collected Poems 1917-1952* Archibald MacLeish
1954 *The Waking* Theodore Roethke
1955 *Collected Poems* Wallace Stevens
1956 *Poems - North & South* Elizabeth Bishop
1957 *Things of this World* Richard Wilbur
1958 *Promises: Poems 1954-1956* Robert Penn Warren

1959 *Selected Poems 1928-1958* Stanley Kunitz
1960 *Heart's Needle* W.D. Snodgrass
1961 *Times Three: Selected Verse from Three Decades* Phyllis McGinley
1962 *Poems* Alan Dugan
1963 *Pictures from Breughel* William Carlos Williams
1964 *At the End of the Open Road* Louis Simpson
1965 *77 Dream Songs* John Berryman
1966 *Selected Poems* Richard Eberhart
1967 *Live or Die* Anne Sexton
1968 *The Hard Hours* Anthony Hecht
1969 *Of Being Numerous* George Oppen
1970 *Untitled Subjects* Richard Howard
1971 *The Carrier of Ladders* W.S. Merwin
1972 *Collected Poems* James Wright
1973 *Up Country* Maxine Kumin
1974 *The Dolphin* Robert Lowell
1975 *Turtle Island* Gary Snyder
1976 *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* John Ashbery
1977 *Divine Comedies* James Merrill
1978 *Collected Poems* Howard Nemerov
1979 *Now and Then* Robert Penn Warren
1980 *Selected Poems* Donald Justice
1981 *The Morning of the Poem* James Schuyler
1982 *The Collected Poems* Sylvia Plath
1983 *Selected Poems* Galway Kinnell
1984 *American Primitive* Mary Oliver
1985 *Yin* Carolyn Kizer
1986 *The Flying Change* Henry Taylor
1987 *Thomas and Beulah* Rita Dove
1988 *Partial Accounts: New and Selected Poems* William Meredith
1989 *New and Collected Poems* Richard Wilbur
1990 *The World Doesn't End* Charles Simic
1991 *Near Changes* Mona Van Duyn
1992 *Selected Poems* James Tate
1993 *The Wild Iris* Louise Gluck
1994 *Neon Vernacular: New & Selected Poems* Yusef Komunyakaa
1995 *The Simple Truth* Philip Levine
1996 *The Dream of the Unified Field* Jorie Graham
1997 *Alive Together: New and Selected Poems* Lisel Mueller
1998 *Black Zodiac* Charles Wright
1999 *Blizzard of One* Mark Strand
2000 *Repair: Poems* C. K. Williams
2001 *Different Hours* Stephen Dunn
2002 *Practical Gods* Carl Dennis
2003 *Moy Sand and Gravel* Paul Muldoon
2004 *Walking to Martha's Vineyard* Franz Wright
2005 *Delights & Shadows* Ted Kooser

'Everything from now on will be different'

by Gretchen Fowler April 7, 2005

Now that he's won the coveted Pulitzer Prize for poetry, Nebraska poet Ted Kooser said, "everything from now on will be different."

Kooser said he's thrilled about the honor but concerned what the notoriety might do.

He doesn't want his poems to be published just because his name is on them. He said they might not be good poems, and he wants his work to be judged fairly.

He said poetry can make an ordinary life more exciting to live, and it's often the ordinary things that he writes about.

He said he tries to look at ordinary things in an imaginative way, making them better than what they are.

"If you read enough poetry," he said, "anything can be special."

Kooser said he was introduced to poetry in school, and as an adolescent, he thought poetry would be a good way to get girls. He took his writing more seriously around age 18 and has written every day for the past 50 years.

Admitting that he's not always a good writer, Kooser said he turns out only about 10 to 12 poems per year that he feels are good enough to publish.

He said, "I'm not an inspired writer every day by any means."

Kooser's advice to people wanting to write poetry is, "Read, read, read. We all learn the arts by imitation."

—excerpted from *The Grand Island Independent*

An example of Kooser's poetry

Most of the comments about his poetry mention its accessibility and ease of understanding. Here is a recent example:

Best Face

"Just put on your best face," Mother would say, telling me how to get on in the world, and I've knotted its straps so many mornings that I'm used to the heat, the stickiness, the intractable stiffness around the mouth.

The fabric's worn thin, with a few small patches, and it's spotted with stains, and today at the mirror I could almost see through it into that other face, the one I started with so many years ago, not the best face but my own small fearful kisser, peering out, hoping for someone to show it the way.

—Ted Kooser

Insurance man wrote poetry each day before work

continued from page one

zine than read a poem,” says Kooser, noting the common complaint that poetry is hard to decipher or full of elusive, hidden meanings. “In the real world, if you come across a poem, who says, ‘Study it’? If it doesn’t do anything for you, you just move on.”

Kooser wants readers to linger, of course, which is why he works so hard to make his poems clear — sometimes going through 40 or 50 drafts. One of his best critics, he says, is his wife, Kathleen Rutledge, editor of the *Lincoln Journal Star*.

A few years ago at Lincoln Benefit Life, he showed poems to his secretary. If she didn’t understand them, he’d revise. “I never want to be thought of as pandering to a broad audience,” he says, “but you can tweak a poem just slightly and broaden the audience very much. If you have a literary allusion, you limit the audience. Every choice requires a cost-benefit analysis.”

Kooser has done several “risk analyses” regarding his career choices, too, each of which pushed him toward a literary life, albeit in a circuitous way.

The first came during his undergraduate years at Iowa State, where he majored in architecture until his junior year. That’s when the math and the physics “killed me,” he says. He switched

into classes that would allow him to teach high school English.

After a year of teaching high school, he began a master of arts program at the University of Nebraska, but again there was an unexpected detour. The problem: He was so focused on his studies with poet Karl Shapiro that he let his other classes slide. The solution: he began working in the insurance industry, a career that lasted 35 years.

Such decisions might sound more practical than poetic. But in his life, as in his work, the extraordinary stems from the ordinary. “I liked the money and the benefits. I liked the structure, too,” he says of the corporate world. He began writing at 4:30 or 5 a.m. each day, a habit he still continues, often with dogs Alice and Howard by his side.

His teaching career resumed at the University of Nebraska in the 1970s, when he taught creative writing to nontraditional students. He returned as a visiting professor after retiring from his insurance company in 1999.

But his experience in the corporate world influences his literary work in surprising ways. His book *Sure Signs* (1980) opens with a poem called “Selecting a Reader.” In it, Kooser describes the kind of audience he wants: a woman who weighs the choice of buying one of his books or having her dirty raincoat dry cleaned. The coat wins.

Now, years later, the poem reveals much about the new laureate. “I am still interested in acknowledging that the people who read books have other priorities, and I want to consider those. I want to write books of poems interesting enough and useful enough that they can compete with the need to get a raincoat cleaned.”

Some might snicker at that, but Kooser has never been afraid to say what he feels or to express deep emotion. When he battled cancer a few years ago, poetry provided an important anchor.

Each day he’d write a short poem — on a postcard — to a close friend. Those poems, which celebrated the heartbreaking loveliness of life, eventually became *Winter Morning Walks: 100 Postcards to Jim Harrison*, which won the Nebraska Book Award in 2001.

“The kind of poem I like very much looks at the world and shows readers its designs and beauty and significance in a new way,” he says. “It’s like a type of kaleidoscope, only I don’t have colored glass chips, I just have [words as] mirrors, mirror patterns to make ordinary things look attractive.”

Those “mirrors” wouldn’t work nearly as well without Kooser’s keen observation. “If you pay attention to the ordinary world, there are all sorts of wonderful things in it,” he says. “But most of us go through the day without noticing.”

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