

December 10, 2009

Holiday Greetings from the Poet Laureate

During my time as Poet Laureate, I am trying to make the literary arts more accessible to the disabled. Last summer, through the Patient Voices Project, I set up a free creative writing course taught through Iowa State University for people with disabilities. The course was taught by Lonnie Carrick—one of my specially trained graduate students—who conducted the course on-line with home visits.

<http://www.uiowa.edu/artsshare/pvp/index.html>

This fall I've been working with the Department for the Blind in Des Moines. They asked me to help them think of a way to make poetry more accessible to the blind. I took this challenge back to my undergraduate poetry-writing students at ISU, and they went to work. They created poems that appealed to all five senses. They created songs, sound effects, and tactile art pieces to accompany the poems. We had a reading/exhibit opening on Dec. 1 at the Department of the Blind and the room was packed. We had a real exchange—between the students, the blind, and the rest of the audience. Please click on these links and take a look at this project. I want to develop it further and would welcome suggestions.

<http://www.news.iastate.edu/news/2009/nov/blind>

http://events.desmoinesregister.com/details_events.php?eventID=133803

A new NPR radio show premiered this fall: The State of the Re: Union. A very talented poet named Al Letson hosts this show, spotlighting interesting cities around the country. In November, Letson profiled Des Moines and invited me to write a poem about our state capital. Check out this site:

<http://stateofthereunion.com/>

I've met with an array of other groups during these past few months, in every corner of the state. I began the autumn season with Peggy Burger's classes at Central

Junior High in Muscatine, working on a collaborative poem about the Mississippi River. What a great time we had writing up the fun things that happen on the river—from water skiing to the Fourth of July fireworks.

I met with a breast cancer support group in Des Moines, then with a group of energetic teachers in Nevada for the Boone-Story County Reading Council where I gave a reading from *The Girls on the Roof*, my latest book. I also gave readings from *The Girls* in such places as the Christian Peterson Art Museum at Iowa State University, Arts on Grand in Spencer, KASI Radio in Ames, The Des Moines Public Library, and a host of great independent bookstores. Please patronize these folks who are doing such a good job of selling poetry and other literature for Iowans:

Muscatine Books and More

<http://www.muscatinebooks.com>

21st Century Books in Fairfield

<http://www.21stbooks.com>

University of Northern Iowa Book & Supply

http://www.panthersupply.com/buy_main.asp

The Hearst Center for the Arts in Cedar Falls:

<http://www.tfaoi.com/newsml/n1m676.htm>

The Pioneer Bookshop in Grinnell

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

The Book Vault in Okaloosa

<http://www.bookvault.org/NASApp/store/IndexJsp>

Beaverdale Books in Des Moines

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

Prairie Lights Bookstore in Iowa City

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

Stone Printing in Carroll

<http://www.stoneprinting.com/eGen/cnt/Member/IBAusers.asp>

I also toured my reader's theatre play *Farmscape* throughout the state, from the Food Security and World Food Prize conference in Des Moines, to the Hearst Center in Cedar Falls, to Loras College in Dubuque. Two different productions took place on the ISU campus, and another sponsored by the Ames Public Library. I continue to marvel at the energetic casts, musicians and producers who support and develop this piece.

Universities around the country are now picking up this play and I'm scheduling performances into the academic year 2010-11.

In addition, I've been touring a performance piece of my book *The Girls on the Roof*--a long narrative poem about a mother and daughter stuck on top of the roof of Crazy Eddy's Café on the banks of the Mississippi River for three days during the 1993 flood. There, the two women discover that they've both had an affair with the same man.

I've worked with the internationally renowned Eulenspiegel Puppet Company (<http://www.puppetspuppets.com>) to create a performance piece from selections of *The Girls on the Roof*. In this one-hour adult (not for children) production, I read poems from my new book while puppeteer Monica Leo brings the scenes to life through the use of hand, rod, and shadow puppets. This show, filled with old time music, romance, intrigue, humor, folklore, and the flora and fauna of the Mississippi River basin, will dazzle the ear with its poetic rhythms, and delight the eye with its likenesses of an unforgettable cast of characters.

So far, the responses to this piece have been enthusiastic:

"What a wonderful creation and a wonderful performance of it you shared with us last evening. *The Girls on the Roof* is a treasure, and a treat for mind, eyes, and ears. Thank you for bringing it to Grinnell. "

--Jonathan Andelson, director, Center for Prairie Studies, Grinnell College

Future performances of *The Girls on the Roof*:

Jan. 29th 7:00 P.M. Ames Public Library

April 15th 7:00 P.M. Bettendorf Pubic Library

April 23 Burlington, Time and Place TBA

Last year I met a very talented theatre artist from Los Angeles. Where was she living? In Coon Rapids, IA, working on a novel. Karan Founds-Benton helped me direct and produce *Farmscape* in Coon Rapids. Then she discovered my book of poetry *Driving the Body Back*. This book has been performed as a theatrical piece throughout the Midwest and on Iowa Public Television. It has been used in speech contests and classrooms all over the country. Over the summer, Karan adapted the book to the stage as a one-woman show. Through a grant from the Iowa Arts Council, Karan previewed the show at the ISU M-Shop on November 29th. She is now looking for other venues for performances. If you are interested in a performance, please email Karan Benton at:

krunamok@yahoo.com

If you would like more information about any of these projects, you also can contact me at: mswander@iastate.edu

Have a wonderful winter holiday. Let the snow keep falling, the writing flowing, and the rutabagas rolling.

Cheers,

Mary Swander
Poet Laureate of the State of Iowa

