

# THE OKLAHOMA POETS LAUREATE: A SOURCEBOOK, HISTORY, AND ANTHOLOGY

By S.P. HOLLIDAY

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As noted by author S.P. Holliday, the United States was somewhat slow to embrace the appointment of poet laureates. California was the first state to name a poet laureate in 1915, eight years after Oklahoma became the 46th state. In 1923, Oklahoma appointed Violet McDougal as its first poet laureate. And, as Holliday writes, McDougal's poetry was not about Oklahoma but about Paris and other European cities. She served until 1931.

A disinterest in poetry seemed to prevail as Oklahoma grew up. Providing a chronology of the position of poet laureate of Oklahoma (as well as an anthology of poems), Holliday writes that the second person to hold the position was not appointed until 1931 and again, the subject matter of the poems of that poet laureate, Paul Kroeger, was not Oklahoma. However, it may be helpful to keep in mind that the Dust Bowl years began in the 1930s, so perhaps Oklahomans of that era were more focused on survival.

The third Oklahoma poet laureate, Jennie Harris Oliver, was appointed in 1940. She wrote about Oklahoma, helped to establish the Poetry Society of Oklahoma; mentored young poets; and read her work as she traveled the state, setting the standard for the poets laureate who followed. During World War II, Oklahoma consistently filled the position, but it was vacant from 1946 to 1963.

Later Oklahoma poets laureate were in their seventies and eighties when appointed. In 1971, Culver Fry's collection *The Umbilical Cord* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and in 1977, Fry was appointed Oklahoma's poet laureate, a position she held for eighteen years. Fry wrote of her Cherokee and Anglo heritage as well as metaphysical concepts.

In 1994 Oklahoma passed legislation defining the Oklahoma Poet Laureate as an honorary position, appointed by the governor for two years. The law did not limit terms

served, so a poet could be re-appointed. Francine Ringold has been the only poet re-appointed thus far, serving from 2003 to 2007. Ringold is known internationally and edited *Nimrod: The International Journal of Prose and Poetry*.

On April 19, 1995, the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was bombed. Carol Hamilton had been appointed as the Poet Laureate in January of that year. Hamilton's poem "Braced Against the Wind" was written after the bombing. Hamilton's choice of words describe the strength and depth of Oklahomans enduring crises: "We do not cower At disaster/We bend and dance On the tall grass/The wind calls us together."

Holliday points out that since 1995, the position of Oklahoma Poet Laureate has become more sophisticated and better received, primarily due to the passing of legislation by the state government. In 2007, N. Scott Momaday was appointed poet laureate. Momaday had won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1968 for *House Made of Dawn*, and had written about Oklahoma and his Native American heritage in his 1976 *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.

Many other notable poets have since served as the Oklahoma Poet Laureate including Jim Barnes, Nathan Brown, and currently, Benjamin Myers. All have some connection to Oklahoma, and many celebrate their Native American heritage. Myers, the twentieth poet laureate of Oklahoma, was born in Chandler, Oklahoma, and still lives there. Myers serves as a professor of Literature at Oklahoma Baptist University. Myers' poem "Ancestors" from his 2010 collection *Elegy for Trains*, describes his ancestors looking at him from their poses in black-and-white photos. Myers' ancestors are depicted wearing roughed-up trousers and plowing through the hard red dirt with mules. Myers compares his life to theirs, describing the guilt of having a lawn mower to ease his "work," as well as his own hard work trying to make his students' minds grow, as opposed to growing the food he eats. It is apparent that Oklahomans not only embrace the land they live on and the people they are, but also the poetry that describes all.

## BOOKS RECEIVED

*Love Pane* by Stella Shen (how to write haiku). 3rd ed., 2015. Self-published.