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THE POETRY HOME REPAIR MANUAL: PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR BEGINNING POETS By Ted Kooser University of Nebraska Press 163 pp., \$19.95 Available in Feb. 2005

# Retired insurance man puts a premium on verse

Meet the new poet laureate of the United States

By [Elizabeth Lund](#)

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." Mr. Kooser, a 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, Neb.

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

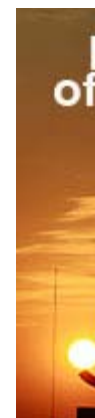
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that has faded; a brown recluse spider walking inside the bathtub. The setting may be rural America, but the scene is universal. That resonance, along with his clear, graceful style, have earned him numerous awards, including two NEA fellowships and a Pushcart Prize. 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 magazine 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.

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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.

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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."

Some reviewers have complained that Kooser writes sentimental poems, but he shrugs off such comments. "Sentimentality is a completely subjective word," he notes.

"If I don't take the risk, I'll wind up with a bloodless poem. I have to be out there on the edge." He likens the process to the movie "Modern Times," where Charlie Chaplin roller skates on a department store balcony to impress a woman. "You have to run the risk of falling down into ladies ready to wear."

Kooser has given several readings since his installation last month, and the response has been encouraging, he says. "I have had many letters from people who said that they don't usually read

poetry but have been trying mine and finding that they like it. My work seems to present an example of a kind of writing that a wider audience might use as a point of entry into poetry."

Still, he is realistic about how much he can accomplish in a one-year term as poet laureate. "If I could convince a few people who don't read poetry that it's worth reading, that would be enough, really."

- *Elizabeth Lund writes about poetry for the Monitor.*

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