



Execs say writing poetry helps improve their form

Poet-executives fight stress, reclaim individuality, express emotions, gain stability and transform daily experiences in 'strangely restorative' exercise

By Ann Therese Palmer
Special to the Tribune

November 25, 2004

Ask William R. Fuller, Northern Trust's chief fiduciary officer, to describe where he's worked for the past 20 years and he'll mention an office at the bank's headquarters along LaSalle Street.

Ask that same question of William R. Fuller, author of four poetry volumes, and he's a mite less literal. "A folk tale surrounded by the 'L,' is like "a folk tale circled by a train," he wrote in a poem dedicated to a bank colleague.

Like America's current poet laureate, Ted Kooser, who wrote poetry while working as a Nebraska insurance executive, makes a regular habit of writing poems, usually on his 45-minute train commute. While it's unclear how many other executives do as poets, it's safe to say Fuller is not the only wordsmith who views his day job as the stuff of folk tales.

Poets & Patrons, a Chicago-based poetry writers' support group, estimates that the metro Chicago area has about 100 poet-executives.

Fuller, who has a doctorate in English, says setting aside the stresses of his high-level post to write poetry is a relief.

"My day's experiences are transformed into something else by the process," he says. "Don't ask me to explain it."

Like Fuller, Jared Smith, president of Poets & Patrons, was a college English major. He became a senior executive at a major corporation and never stopped composing poems.

Smith views his efforts as an antidote to the pressures of conforming to organizational norms on the job. "Writing poetry is a way to reclaim your individuality," he says. "Writing poetry is a way to reclaim your individuality."

The type of poetry Chicago's executives produce varies, he reports, but it's often related to their occupations. "It's often related to their occupations," he says. "It's often related to their occupations."

Some find an outlet for passions best left unexpressed at the office.

"It's my way of expressing strong emotions like turmoil or joy," says Al DeGenova, Chicago-based Northern Trust media director for Grohe, a German faucet manufacturer. DeGenova has been known to transform his workday into composition sessions meditating on the nature of family and relationships.

"My poetry ... helps me create a certain emotional stability by helping me realize what's worth getting angry about," he explains.

While Kooser commands tens of thousands of dollars in royalties and reading fees for his poetry, Chi-Kooser does it for the money.

Fuller says he manages to earn several hundred dollars from his poetry each year. Gerald Murray, a senior executive speechwriter, pegs his poetry-related annual income at \$1,000, which includes some payments for readings.

anthologies.

The more tangible benefit, several poets assert, comes in improving their performance as executives.

Smith has developed a more nuanced way of looking at mundane business activities, which helps him he says.

When he writes about offices, "I'm hunting for relationships, for how I relate to people in the business look at things in a linear way. A leads to B leads to C. Poetry is non-linear."

That leads to original approaches. "I'm thinking about two or three things at once and trying to solve them linking them together in a creative way," Smith said.

Former retailer Susan Pritzker, now president of a local family foundation, agrees.

"As a poet, I'm more of an observer," says Pritzker, who writes about relationships and occasionally people a situation. When I make a business decision, I think this makes me more objective."

Kooser, who retired from the insurance business five years ago, sees poetry writing as a way of bringing

"In a stressful and disorderly world, with lots of phone calls and papers flying in and out, a poem is a source of order of 10 poetry books. "Writing poetry makes my world orderly. It brings me solace. It's a source of endless

What sort of entertainment? In "At The Office Early," Kooser describes a bank with "ball-point pens piling up snow of deposit slips."

In his poem "The Salesman," the title character's "vinyl shoes" are "shiny and white as little Karmann reference to a Volkswagen car produced between 1955 to 1974.

And in "Four Secretaries," Kooser does a little eavesdropping: "All through the day I hear or overhear at the desk ... singing their troubled marriage ballads, their day-care, car-park, landlord songs."

'A Death at the Office'

The news goes desk to desk

like a memo; Initial

and pass on. Each of us marks

Surprised or Sorry.

The management came early

and buried her nameplate

deep in her desk. They have boxed up

the Midol and Lip-Ice,

the snapshots from home,

wherever it was--nephews

and nieces, a strange, blurred cat
with fiery, flashbulb eyes
as if it grieved. But who grieves here?

We have her ballpoints back,
her bud vase. One of us tears
the scribbles from her calendar.

--From the volume "Sure Signs" by Ted Kooser (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980)

'Four Secretaries'

All through the day I hear or overhear
their clear, light voices calling
from desk to desk, young women whose fingers
play casually over their documents,
setting the incoming checks to one side,
the thick computer reports to the other,
tapping the correspondence into stacks
while they sing to each other, not intending
to sing nor knowing how beautiful
their voices are as they call back and forth,
singing their troubled marriage ballads,
their day-care, car-park, landlord songs.
Even their anger with one another
is lovely; the color rising in their throats,
their white fists clenched in their laps,
the quiet between them that follows.
And their sadness--how deep and full of love
is their sadness when one among them
is hurt, and they hear her calling
and gather about her to cry.

--From "Weather Central" by Ted Kooser (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994)

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