

Poets for the People

Local wordsmiths warm up for visits by nationally known poets

by JAMIE NEWSOM

It can rhyme, it can slam. It alliterates and resonates.

Poems tear at souls, they can sing, cut, heal, or mock. Anyone can write a poem, but it takes precision, talent, and a remarkable way with words to write a good one.

Poetry can be powerful — it can even stop an event at the White House, as poet Sam Hamill discovered when he was scheduled to take part in a poetry event planned by first lady Laura Bush in 2003. Hamill will visit Syracuse on October 13 and read his poetry at the Mulroy Civic Center.

A Buddhist and pacifist, Hamill planned to read poems at the White House that aggressively protested the American invasion of Iraq. When word of his plan got out, the event was cancelled. Hamill subsequently founded Poets Against the War, a group of artists dedicated to peace and protest of the American occupation of Iraq.

Speaking in a phone interview from his home in Port Townsend, Washington, Hamill said he thinks the principles behind the art of poetry are fundamentally against war.

“The Iliad, the story of the Trojan war, is basically one long anti-war epic,” he said of Homer’s violently graphic poem. “It shows warriors for what they really are.”

Hamill is candid about his feelings on poetry as a vehicle for political discourse. He also pointed out that it’s an evolving art form that demands much more from readers than standard entertainment fare like television and video games.

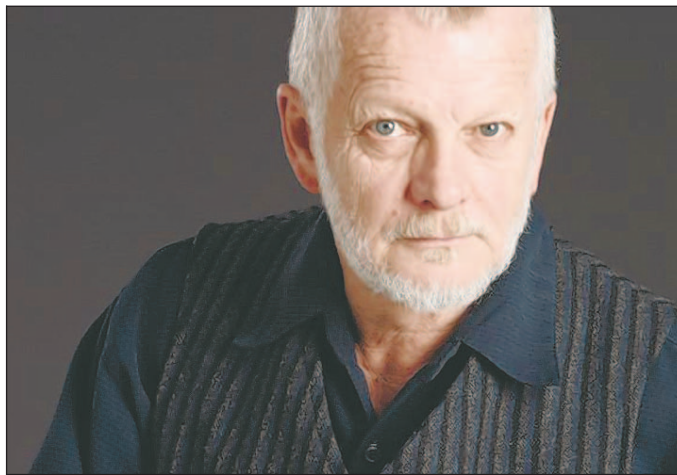
“Poetry changes lives one person at a time,” he said. “It isn’t for everyone.”

Hamill’s appearance in Syracuse is a part of the YMCA Downtown Writer’s Center Fall 2005 Visiting Author Reading Series, which kicks off this Friday with a reading by poet Marianne Boruch, and continues with other nationally recognized poets through November. The spring series includes a reading by United States Poet Laureate Ted Kooser in May.

The poetry scene in Syracuse ranges from formal events and readings by na-

tionally-known names, such as those presented by the Y, to informal writing groups and open-mic nights in coffee shops around town. Phil Memmer, director of the YMCA Downtown Writer’s Center, said his reading series is part of how the center, operating in downtown Syracuse for the past four years, works to bring the benefits of the literary arts to the community.

Memmer, a poet himself, invites 12 to 15 authors to Syracuse each year to present their work and teach students who take writing classes and workshops at the center, which are kept affordable.



Poet Sam Hamill.

Photo by Frank Ross

“It’s unusual for a class to cost more than 50 to 80 dollars,” he said. “We have people who are working, publishing writers, as well as people who just want to take a class for fun,” Memmer said.

The idea is to make the fees as non-prohibitive as possible, so anyone who’s interested can participate. The diversity of students and variety of writing courses offered create a springboard for the literary arts in Syracuse.

Local poet Georgia Popoff teaches classes at the Writer’s Center, and also works with Partners for Arts Education, a local non-profit group working in conjunction with the YMCA to host the visit by the poet laureate. She thinks poetry can be an intimidating art form, but that it’s starting to be treated differently in the education field.

“Poetry and the writing arts are starting to be looked at like creative arts,” Popoff said. “Just like painting and dance.

In addition to readings and classes offered through the YMCA and poetry events sponsored by Syracuse University

and LeMoyne College, spoken-word nights regularly take place in spots like the OnaJava Coffee and Soul Cafe on West Onondaga Street and Coffee Pavilion in Hanover Square.

On a Monday night in August, the group of regulars who meet at Coffee Pavilion for open-mic night wrote and ruminated on the theme, “Squirrels Gone Wild.” With the doors open to a summer night breeze, the fountain in the square provided a backdrop for poets to get behind the microphone to read from their own notebooks or from anthologies of other poets’ work. It’s a friendly environment where aspiring poets and experienced writers gather to share poems and support each other.

They sipped espressos, joked around, and listened intently to whomever got up to read poems, including that week’s featured reader, local poet Mary Stebbins.

Self-proclaimed “cheerleader for poetry” and weekly emcee Jane Cassady said that her small group increases in size during the school year, when Syracuse University and LeMoyne students are around, but that she still has trouble getting people to come to events.

“I’m coming from a place where there were four or five poetry events a week,” she said of her previous home in Orange County, California.

She said she’d like to see more people in Syracuse come out for poetry. “But people here are just more insular,” she said. “There are tons of poets in the world and I just have to drag them out of hiding.”

But Sam Hamill has a different viewpoint. He is adamant that even though poetry might not be as visible as other kinds of art and entertainment, it’s still a dynamic and thriving art form.

“Anyone who thinks poetry is dying isn’t paying attention,” he said. ■

Jamie Newsom is from Anchorage, Alaska, where she was a theater critic for the Anchorage Daily News and co-hosted a weekly public radio program dedicated to local theater. She is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association.

The Orchid Flower

by Sam Hamill

Just as I wonder
whether it’s going to die,
the orchid blossoms

and I can’t explain why it
moves my heart, why such pleasure

comes from one small bud
on a long spindly stem, one
blood red gold flower

opening at mid-summer,
tiny, perfect in its hour.

Even to a white-
haired craggy poet, it’s
purely erotic,

pistil and stamen, pollen,
dew of the world, a spoonful

of earth, and water.
Erotic because there’s death
at the heart of birth,

drama in those old sunrise
prisms in wet cedar boughs,

deepest mystery
in washing evening dishes
or teasing my wife,

who grows, yes, more beautiful
because one of us will die.

from “Almost Paradise: New &
Selected Poems & Translations,”
Shambhala Publications, 2005.

Sam Hamill will read his work Oct. 13 at 7 p.m. in Bevard Studio, Mulroy Civic Center. To order tickets, call 474-6851, ext. 314. For more info on Hamill, visit www.poetsagainsthewar.org. For more info on the Downtown Writer’s Center, visit www.ymcaarts.org.