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# The importance of poetry in American libraries

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*A new PBS series profiles 13 key American poets.*

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It seems fitting that in the midst of a renewed interest in our nation's social history heralded by the celebration of our Constitution's 200th anniversary, we also be given the opportunity to reflect upon our literary history. A new 13-part video series, "Voices and Visions," scheduled to air on most PBS stations beginning in January, will make this possible. The series, produced by the New York Center for Visual History and presented on PBS by the South Carolina ETV Network, is funded in large part by the Annenberg/CPB Project and the National Endowment for the Humanities. It represents a collaboration between scholars, filmmakers, educators, and poets intended to provide a visually rich yet informative overview of the range and complexity of American poetry.

"Voices and Visions" profiles thirteen American poets through individual one-hour programs that focus on the creative process and the works of the poets (rather than on their biographies). The group of poets selected for inclusion in the series are names readily associated with America's modern poetic voice: Elizabeth Bishop, Hart Crane, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, Robert Lowell, Marianne Moore, Sylvia Plath, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Walt Whitman, and William Carlos Williams. A combination of documentary, dramatic and experimental film techniques are used to highlight various sounds, images and concepts found in poetry as a broad art form and, more specifically, in each se-

lected poet's voice and vision.

Through the participation of contemporary poets, writers, and critics such as Allen Ginsberg, Stephen Spender, Adrienne Rich, James Merrill, Mary McCarthy, and Joyce Carol Oates, critical commentary is provided and additional views are offered by individuals who knew the writers as friends or family members. In the program on Ezra Pound, for example, interviews with Pound's companion Olga Rudge and his daughter, Mary DeRachewiltz, explore the poet's increasing disillusionment with modern life, his isolation and his gradual obsession with economic and political themes.

In addition to the 13 programs, printed texts accompany the series. These include an anthology of poetry, *Modern American Poets: Their Voices and Visions*, edited by Robert DiYanni (Random House, 1988), and a collection of critical essays, *Voices and Visions: The Poet in America*, edited by Helen Vendler (Vintage Books, 1987). The ALA Communications Department will provide library information kits about the series that contain programming ideas, promotion suggestions, and a viewer's guide with chapters on each poet to extend the ideas presented in the video. These kits will be sent to academic and public libraries.

In a time of shrinking budgets, limited resources and changing technologies, the importance of poetry in American libraries may seem obscure. Should libraries consider poetry a priority? Do pa-



Cr: Houghton Library

*Robert Lowell*

trons find pleasure in free verse? Are stanzas of iambic pentameter relevant in a world dominated by television? To answer these questions we must review the underlying value of the humanities in American culture and understand why participation in and preservation of the humanities is vital to our spiritual welfare and intellectual survival.

In 1980 a landmark publication entitled *The Humanities in American Life* (University of California Press, 1980) was issued in an attempt to affirm the importance of the humanities in American education and public life. The Commission on the Humanities (established in 1978) issued this report so that Americans would realize how the humanities contribute to our knowledge about ourselves as well as other individuals and societies around us. The report emphasized that through the humanities we reflect on the fundamental question of what it means to be human. We awaken our senses and expand our perspectives; we are better able to make sense of a paradoxical world where hope and growth are shadowed by death and despair, where prosperity is as evident as poverty. Consequently, through exposure to historical study, creative and expository writing, or the reading of fiction and poetry, we probe the depths of the mysterious self and gain insight as well as greater desire to realize our human potential and our civic responsibility.

Poetry is "a way of saying," as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren state in their standard text, *Understanding Poetry* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976). As infants, we experience pleasure from the rhythm and rhyme of poetry and, as Dylan Thomas commented, a lifelong love affair with



Cr: Rosenbach Museum & Library

*Marianne Moore*

words may begin as a result of listening to the chiming of Mother Goose rhymes. As we struggle to learn a language, our imaginations respond to the sound of nonsensical words strung together in teasing verbal melodies. In this way poetry touches a "natural" impulse in us very early in life.

Poetry is, of course, metaphysical and depends upon using words in figurative and non-literal ways. This characteristic can make poetry seem strange, difficult and irrelevant to the pragmatist. For example, in an information society we are accustomed to gathering facts and figures to enable us to meet our daily obligations and to plan for the future. We tend to think of discourse as a means by which we define our precise needs in a practical world. We believe we can best control our lives if we have access and command of organized knowledge. However, even in such a specialized society, we recognize that some of our "facts" are not clear-cut and that we must handle situations that are not always black or white. It follows then, that we must have the ability to discern feelings and attitudes; to make subjective as well as objective descriptions and analyses. In short, we must learn to think multi-dimensionally in a multi-dimensional world. Poetry offers not only a way of saying but a way of seeing. A poem, Wallace Stevens said, is an "answering look" given back by the poet to life.

American libraries have a responsibility to provide not only materials and programs for a literate society but also for a critical society. Traditionally, collections in both public and academic libraries have been well balanced between English and American poets and major writers, such as the 13

poets featured in "Voices and Visions," are well represented. As a result, American libraries have helped create a social and institutional support that enables poetry to flourish in our culture.

Typically, library collections covering American poetry contain a variety of materials including separate and collected works of a poet's history, prose and essays; biographical materials such as biographies, autobiographies, selected published letters, and memoirs; critical works, and source studies relating to the body of a poet's work, to individual works, or to the tradition of poetry in which the work is produced; collections of critical essays; general anthologies of poetry; and various reference materials listing explication sources, standard editions, or even identification of words, lines and passages in single poems. Reference librarians are experienced in locating criticism, reviews, and explication of poems, since poetry is enigmatic and readers frequently need assistance with defining, recognizing and applying poetic devices and terminology. Frequently, academic libraries own the popular and scholarly journals where critical essays are published, but more often libraries do not have extensive collections of literary or little magazines. Many of these small press publications can be identified in the *International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*, edited by Len Fulton and Ellen Ferber (Dustbooks, 1987), and fre-

quently current small press publications focusing on contemporary American poetry can be supplied by Small Press Distribution, Inc. (1814 San Pablo Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94702) or by Consortium Books/Bookslinger (213 E. 4th Street, St. Paul, MN 55101). Basic subject or publisher-based approval plans will provide quality small press publications issued by presses such as Copper Canyon, Thunder's Mouth, or North Point. Other useful information on the development of American poetry collections may be found in *English and American Literature: Sources and Strategies for Collection Development*, edited by William McPherson (ACRL Publications in Librarianship, no. 45).

If libraries want to evaluate the status of their collections relating to the 13 poets studied in "Voices and Visions," the bibliography in Vender's *Voices and Visions: The Poet in America* provides an excellent list of basic and new texts on each of the writers.

Many academic libraries preserve and develop collections of literary manuscripts, memorabilia, and author correspondence. These collections may be identified through reference sources such as *American Library Resources*, by Robert Downs (ALA, 1951 with supplements), the *National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections* (Shoe String, 1962- ), or John Robbins' *American Literary Manuscripts: A Checklist of Holdings in Academic, Historical and Public Libraries, Museums, and Author's Homes in the United States* (University of Georgia, 1977). For example, the literary manuscripts of Hart Crane are found largely in the collections of sixteen American libraries, two private owners, and one philanthropic foundation in the United States; the main body of Eliot manuscripts and letters is in seven university libraries, most notably in the Houghton Library at Harvard University and at King's College, Cambridge University. In this way, libraries provide a visual and historical record of a poet's growth, methods of composition, and biography.

The vastness and richness of American library collections in the area of American poetry speaks directly to our profession's commitment to the intrinsic and cultural values of poetry. It is imperative that libraries not only collect and preserve poetry materials but also provide access and interpretation of these materials for the public. Creative interpretive exhibits, scheduling poetry readings, offering lectures on the development of a poet's career, all heighten awareness and appreciation of poetry by the public. Many state and regional humanities councils will help fund programs such as these, and public and academic libraries can work together on such projects with fruitful results.

The series "Voices and Visions" brings national attention to the characteristics, spirit and tone found in American poetry and allows both academic and public libraries the opportunity to make creative and immediate use of their impressive resources in the best of humanistic traditions. ■■

### Christmas info-carols

By Mary Jane Engh  
Formerly of the Owen Science and  
Engineering Library  
Washington State University

#### Reference Librarian's Song

I'm dreaming of a bright Christmas  
Just like the ones I thought I knew,  
When my I.Q. glistened  
And patrons listened  
And everything I said was true.  
I'm dreaming of a bright Christmas  
With every reference source I cite,  
I cross my fingers good and tight,  
And I hope my guesses turn out right!

#### Serial Record Rhyme

Christmas is coming, the journals must be  
bound.  
Please to give us patience when they can't be  
found.  
If you haven't got the patience, your pity will  
do.  
If you haven't got the pity—oh well, God bless  
you!

—Cheerfully submitted with the author's permission by Elizabeth P. Roberts, Head, Owen Science and Engineering Library.

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