

## A Fresh Look At Nebraska

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By LuAnn Schindler

Robert Frost once noted, "Writing a poem is discovering." For Nebraska's poets, our state - its activities, people, and commonalities - form the backdrop of discovery. Stanzas, couplets, and free verse speak about our collective history, our varied present, our imagined future.

Here, poetry comes to life by contrasting stylists: traditionalists, experimentalists, cowboy humorists, slam artists, poet laureates. Check out the individual stars of Nebraska's poetry scene, and discover how this universal language unites our state, giving it an inspired voice.

Willa Cather waxed poetic about the differences between evening and youth in "Prairie Spring." Her description paints a vivid picture of the season of renewal. "...the growing wheat, the growing weeds, the toiling horses, the tired men; the long empty roads, sullen fires of sunset, fading, the eternal, unresponsive sky."

Nebraska's Legislature appointed the first poet laureate in 1921. John G. Neihardt accepted the lifetime appointment. He wrote 25 volumes of poetry, but it's his insight and spiritual perception that stand out.

In college, one of my profs read "The Song of Hugh Glass," a celebration of fur trading along the Missouri River. It was an exercise in visualization. We stretched out on the floor while he read. A flashlight, used to highlight the text, illuminated the story. I'll never forget the powerful impact of the poet's words and my professor's energized delivery.

Nebraska's State Poet, William Kloefkorn, taught English at Nebraska Wesleyan. Kloefkorn's poetry offers a sense of place and builds a clear image of people with Midwestern roots. One of my favorite Kloefkorn pieces describes a scene from a cemetery. "I stand alone at the foot of my father's grave, trembling to tell: the door to the granary is open, Sir, and someone lost the bucket to the well."

A favorite Marjorie Saiser poem talks about a husband and wife who are driving separate vehicles but parked next to each other at a stoplight. He flirts, and when she makes an even louder production of capturing his attention, he grows embarrassed. What's a wife to do? Think of something even bigger to pull at the next stop light.

Two of my contemporary favorites are husband and wife duo Matt Mason and Sarah McKinstry-Brown. Part of the Omaha slam poetry scene, these two make poetry come alive. Mason performed for my classroom. Students were mesmerized with his upbeat, hip performance.

A favorite line from a McKinstry-Brown selection reads like this: Have you ever seen a field of fireflies? My first summer night on the plains, I thought I was having a seizure or witnessing the synapses of God's brain." She's describing and delighting a move from dusty, old Albuquerque to cool, urban Omaha.

I think she's on to something!

I've read Kosmicki, Sanders, Brummels, Hedge Coke and Kooser. Harrison, Kuzma, and Schmitz have a spot on my bookshelf. I've taken classes with Fort and Welch.

Nebraska poets understand and illustrate the intricacies of this place we love. They know how to bring poetry to life. Their words prove it.