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Behind the Book: Rhode Island's State Poet

SEPTEMBER 10, 2013 3:12 PM



By Leah Cantania

Poetry: the art often overlooked by today's general public. As an artistic expression built primarily on the emotions of the writer, and one that makes little money, poets no longer hold the same prestige they did in the days of the travelling bard. However, the United States still appoints a Poet Laureate, and in 1989 Rhode Island made a move to recognize the importance of poetry by establishing a State Poet.

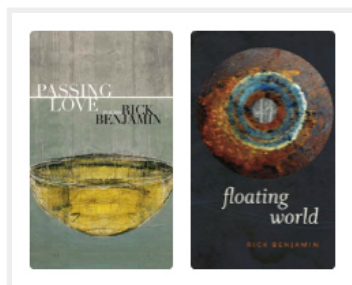
The State Poet of Rhode Island is typically an individual who represents poetry's highest achievements in the state. Every five years, the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts receives nominations for the State Poet. A panel of experts in the literary field (from out of state, to avoid any potential conflict of interest) then presents their choice to the governor, who makes the announcement. To date, there have been five State Poets, each serving a five-year term.

There are no officially assigned duties for the State Poet of Rhode Island. Rather, each State Poet devises his or her own contribution. Michael Harper, the first State Poet, wrote a poem honoring the christening of a navy ship in Newport. Following him, C. D. Wright published a literary map of Rhode Island, and Tom Chandler wrote a column in the *Providence Journal* containing commentary on different poems. The last State Poet, Lisa Starr, produced (and continues to produce) the Block Island Poetry Project each April.

Perhaps the most important contributions the State Poets give to the Rhode Island community are their readings at public schools, colleges and universities, assisted living centers, writing groups, and many other venues. After all, what could be more important for the State Poet than to spread the joy of poetry throughout the general public? Tom Chandler, State Poet from 1999 to 2006, points out, "Always and still, we crave things that are genuine and handcrafted." In poetry, we can enjoy both.

Dr. Rick Benjamin is the current State Poet. In addition to his monthly poetry column in the *Providence Journal*, Benjamin has set his agenda toward promoting ideas of community and the role that poetry can play in building a more compassionate citizenry. Speaking at the Mary Tefft White Cultural Center's Talking in the Library series, he talked passionately about the duties of citizenship, and the

ways in which we can be connected to and serve our community. And though poetry may be an art form sometimes not fully understood by the general public, Rhode Island's State Poets, each in his or her own way, has been dedicated to showing us that in fact poetry is all around us—speaking for us, giving context to our world, and helping us tell our own stories.



But perhaps we should let the poetry speak for itself. Following is a poem from Rick Benjamin's first collection, *Passing Love*:

What It's All About

It might be about
preserving life for life's
sake: someone planting
pachysandra at the foot

of the Japanese maple
 & watching it come back
 year after year. Some folks
 stretch harvest past
 what their bodies
 can store, their hedge
 against death.

They've seen the slightest bounce
 bruise beds where their seeds
 still sleep in the warming
 ground: better to bury
 as many as you can.
 Like leatherbacks
 lumbering large
 bodies up-beach where
 they were born, burying
 hundred of eggs for a few
 hatchlings, who,
 even if they survive
 sand-crossing, head-first hurtle
 through surf, years-
 worth's swimming through
 impossibly open
 seas, may still not live
 to spawn the next
 generation
 All of us stand
 by our young ones'
 beds hoping for a better
 bounce. & some of us
 sea-turtles don't even
 look back. We trust
 what we've buried
 in the ground.

Photograph of Rick Benjamin & Adam Braver by Jill Rodrigues

Behind the Book takes an in depth look at the world of the book through articles and interviews about the creative process, issues in publishing, and the writing life.

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From the Nightstand: President Donald J. Farish

SEPTEMBER 1, 2013 8:21 PM

Interview of President Farish conducted by Jillian Jennett

Dr. Donald J. Farish is the tenth and current president of Roger Williams University. He has been at RWU since 2011.



Recent Reads: President Farish tells us he often has many books going co-currently. However, he concedes, "I have a nasty habit of bringing books with me on trips and leaving them half unread." Still, Dr. Farish presently is deeply engaged in *Lawrence in Arabia* by Scott Anderson. "It gives an entirely different insight into the famous story of Lawrence; much more factually based, it's a breath of fresh air." He is also reading *Bunker Hill* and *The Last Stand*, both by Nathaniel Philbrick (author of *Mayflower*—the 2013 Common Read).

Memorable Books: "*War and Peace*, it has to be my favorite book of all time. When I was in college, I had two weeks to kill between the end of school and the start of my summer job. I read for hours every day and when it was over, it was over; and I loved it." When it comes to a favorite author, Dr. Farish goes right to John Steinbeck, citing his style and fluidity of his stories as something to be cherished.

Earliest Reads: "The first books I ever loved were the Hardy Boys. They were light and didn't have much substance, but I still eagerly awaited each and every new book."



What are people in the Roger Williams University community reading? The *From the Nightstand* team asks which books are on people's nightstands—either being read, or waiting to be read.

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