

Verse By Verse

At poetry readings the 'language of song' transcends all.

Listen to poetry. It's talking to you.

"Any reading you go to there's at least one poem that really comes across, and you feel it, and everybody feels it. It's great," says David Braden, a poet and editor of *Helios*, a new poetry and arts magazine being published in Eugene. Braden believes poetry readings "are the fun part of writing. It's where the vital connection gets made."

And the vital connection is getting made in University lecture rooms and Eugene's community centers, art galleries and private homes.

Richard Murphy, an Irish poet, visited the University in March and read some of his poems to an audience of about 65 people in Gerlinger Lounge.

One of the attractions of poetry readings is the opportunity to "enjoy the pleasure and language of song," he said.

With his smooth voice and calm manner, he presented his audience with an evening of graceful poetry that merged well with the artistic interior of Gerlinger Lounge.

A more informal reading recently took place at the Koinonia Center near the University. Crystos and Dian Millian, two Native American social activists and published poets, held a reading to benefit the Big Mountain Support Group.

An audience of about 35 people sank into couches and armchairs in front of a calm fire while Dian discussed the history of Big Mountain and other Indian issues before reading some of her poems.

"My poetry springs from some political things and from some responses I've had as a human being," Dian Millian says.

And through the poetry, people were able to feel some of the painful emotions that are involved in the struggle for land at Big Mountain.

After Dian, Crystos shared poems with the obviously moved audience, bringing the reading to a close after two-and-a-half hours of intense poetry.

Ron Phillips, a Vietnam veteran and director of "Facing the Wall: A Reading by Vietnam Veterans," a video that records the poetry reading that took place at the traveling replica of the Vietnam Memorial Wall when it came to Eugene in 1985, also believes poetry readings can make strong statements about personal experiences.

"I want to reach people at a heart level. To go beyond the intellect," he says.

"There seems to be two ways of reaching people. One is with a

gun and one is with art. You got to make up your mind which one you're going to use to reach people."

Phillips also finds giving a reading emotionally devastating. "I'm just wasted after an hour or so of reading war poetry... it takes me back, and it makes me work through my own suppressed pain of the war," he says.

But ultimately, he believes poetry "is a real healing process," an art form that strives to "take pain and bring it out into some form of beauty, of hope."

And, he admits, most of his poems aren't war poems, they're love poems.

The University has a series of poetry readings in which nationally, and sometimes internationally, known poets are brought to the University to talk with students and give a reading of their poetry.

The series is funded by a grant from Kenny Moore, a former marathon runner at the University who now writes for *Sports Illustrated*. The Time-Life Foundation also funds the readings with a grant, says John Haislip, director of the creative writing program at the University. The combined grants have been bringing poets to the University for the past eight years.

Recently, internationally known Jamaican poet and playwright Derek Walcott held a reading in the Forum Room at the EMU as part of the reading series. Walcott read to an audience of about 70 students, faculty and community members.

After the reading, as after most of the University readings, a reception was held in which the audience had a chance to meet the poet.

The Lane Literary Guild, a branch of the Lane Regional Arts Council, also regularly holds poetry readings throughout Eugene.

Poet and guild Vice President Annie Davidovicz says its philosophy is "to bring poetry to the community and to make local writers heard, to let them be known."

Davidovicz, who recently held a reading herself along with poet Myrna Pena-Reyes at the Maude Kerns Art Center, believes "poetry is an oral art. I believe in the oral tradition."

"I think reading is theatrical," she says. "There is an element of drama that is necessary for a great poetry reading."

But poetry readings aren't the only type of readings being held in Eugene.

The Literary Lion recently sponsored a reading in the Eugene Public Library by fiction writer Mitch Berman, who just published his first novel, "Time



Illustration by Lorraine Rath

Capsule."

Berman, who grew up in Eugene and now lives in New York, is on a national tour promoting his book and has held readings in such cities as Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles.

He believes fiction readings can be as effective as poetry readings if the words and style of the author are lively. "Poetry always has that," he says. "Fiction readers have some catching up to do."

Berman sees readings as "part of the growing need for the author-promoter." Publishers aren't promoting novels for authors as much as they have in the past, he says.

But even though there may be a steady flow of readings in Eugene, that doesn't mean the flow is overwhelming, and some types of readings are struggling.

The coffee house/open-mike readings, for instance, are hard to find in Eugene.

The Beanery hasn't held any readings in the past year and isn't planning any. The Keystone Cafe doesn't hold readings. The Book and Tea Shop thinks it's a good idea but doesn't hold readings as of now. And Poppi's Grill House, where raving poetry readings used to fill the house and replace the jukebox for a night, is disillusioned with the idea.

Alexi Petrohilos, a manager at

Poppi's, says the restaurant would be "absolutely full" at the readings, but the audience would "sit there all night and not buy anything."

"We can't sacrifice that time when we should be making our money," Petrohilos says.

Petrohilos also has his doubts about the quality of the poetry being read. "I think it's real crap, but there was some good stuff," he says. "It seemed like just a chance for people to get up and show off."

But Braden believes the coffee house/open-mike readings will "probably resurface somewhere... a lot of younger people enjoy (them)."

Haislip also believes they'll resurface. They are usually organized by students or young people that work on them for a while and then move on, he says.

George Wickes, a University English professor, has been going to readings for many years. He has been to readings by such poets as Allen Ginsberg and Dylan Thomas. He calls Thomas "the best I've ever heard. He had this exuberant, energetic style. He would just throw himself into it."

But Wickes admits all readings aren't as thrilling.

"Audiences at poetry readings don't usually get up and cheer.

It's not the same as a football game," he says.

"It takes a lot of concentration to follow a poetry reading, particularly if it's unfamiliar poetry you're hearing."

Hal Powers, a graduate student in the creative writing program, has recently been to some poetry readings to see "what is this all about, what am I going to hear, what can somebody tell me."

"I like the poetic approach to writing," he says. "the economy of words, the sense of rhythm. Those kinds of stylistic things that poetry does, those are the kinds of things I like to work into my fiction writing."

"Going to poetry readings is something I'm exploring. I'll be doing more of it," Powers says.

But Braden is somewhat concerned about poetry's image as an academic pursuit. He believes that sometimes "people don't realize that they can enjoy poetry. I mean they've been taught that they have to study it, and that's not true."

Wickes agrees. "The people that go to poetry readings don't go to fall asleep," he says.

Listen to the words and sounds of a poetry reading. They're in the air in Eugene.

Braden's convinced. "Poetry is great stuff," he says.

— JOHN BRODIE