

Word of mouth

National Poetry Month attempts to revitalize what has become an overlooked art, however poetry is alive and well in the voices and the actions of the next generation

By Rory Carroll

Oregon Daily Emerald

"April is the cruellest month," begins T.S. Eliot's 1922 postmodern masterpiece, "The Waste Land." But for the past five years, The Academy of American Poets has been attempting to revise Eliot's spiteful view of April by naming it National Poetry Month (NPM).

Since 1996, The Academy has attempted to galvanize popular interest in poetry during April. According to its Web site, www.poets.org, the idea is to bring together publishers, booksellers, libraries, schools, and poets around the country to celebrate poetry and its vital place in American culture. Thousands of businesses and non-profit organizations participate through readings, festivals, book displays, workshops and other events, according to the site.

"It started as a way to encourage people to read and write more poetry," said Charles Flowers, director of promotion and coordinator of National Poetry Month. "It has been very successful in creating interest in schools and libraries."

Flowers is in charge of creating a resource kit that is distributed throughout the country to teachers and bookstores. Ten thousand kits go out during April, providing everything from calendars noting national poetry events to suggestions on how to creatively teach poetry in the classroom.

"We operate under Joseph Brodsky's philosophy, 'Poetry should be like milk; it should be delivered to the doorstep,'" Flowers said.

According to National Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, it is difficult to determine the exact relationship between NPM and poetry's resurgence into popular culture.

"It's hard to say because National Poetry Month is part of a general resurgence of interest in poetry. Which is cause, which is effect?" Pinsky said, via an e-

mail interview. "The Favorite Poem Project [www.favoritepoem.org] indicates that more Americans appreciate poems than the old stereotype would indicate."

Other proof of poetry's return to the mainstream can be found on the Internet. In February, USA Today reported that poetry was the eighth most queried term on the search engine Lycos. Furthermore, Lycos estimated that more than 228,400 poetry Web sites exist.

Although evidence suggests that poetry's resurgence may be because of mass communication, Pinsky believes that a recent interest in poetry has risen as a reaction to mass communication.

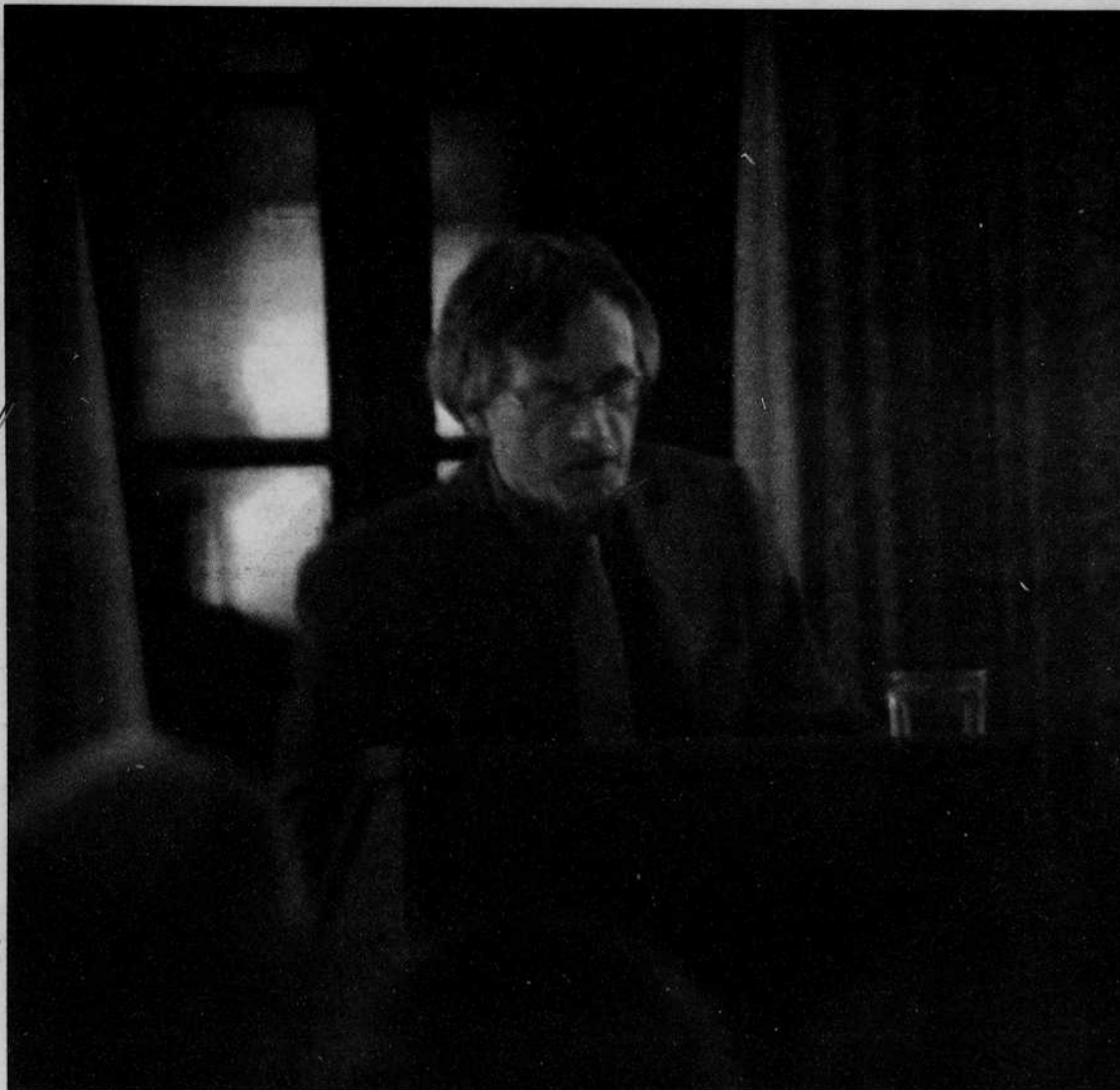
« Poetry finds new life in each new generation. The roots of poetry are just that — roots. Something is always going to grow.

Charles Wright
Pulitzer Prize-winning poet

Today's information age creates a need for people to communicate on a more intimate, human level.

"My own theory is that the electronic media are beautiful, elegant and capable of great work — but they are inherently, by their nature, on a mass scale," Pinsky wrote. "Poetry is inherently, by the nature of its medium, on an individual scale. Poetry's medium is the reader's voice. I think that in reaction to mass media, we crave a medium that is by its nature on a human scale."

But you don't need to search the Net or ask the poet laureate to see that poetry is coming back into popularity. Just drop by The



Azle Malinao-Alvarez Emerald

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Charles Wright reads selections from his work 'Negative Blue: Selected Later Poems' on April 5.

Buzz Coffeehouse on a Monday night. Open Poetry Nights have become a main attraction despite The Buzz's short existence and limited promotion.

"There has been a great turnout. It is really gaining momentum," said Melanie Jones, The Buzz's programming coordinator.

Originally, the reading started as a two-hour event, but organizers at The Buzz are now extending its hours to accommodate the considerable interest both performers and audiences have shown on Monday nights.

Freshman Nathan Langston, a University freshman, said he initiated the Open Poetry Night because he believes it's a necessary form of expression.

"It's the opposite of what people are usually talking about," Langston said. "When people are talking in their everyday lives, they don't talk about the important stuff. They talk about movies and television, but they don't talk about what they are feeling. It creates an instant community. It's like going to church."

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Charles Wright must have felt that same sense of community at his reading on April 5. When Wright finished reading selections from his new book "Negative Blue: Selected Later Poems,"

Ways to hear and be heard during the month

"CALYX, A Journal of Art and Literature by Women" will host five authors who will be reading in the Community Room of the Corvallis Public Library at 7 p.m. Friday, April 14. Poets include Elizabeth Woody, Sharily Smith, Lois Rosen, Abigail Albrecht and Marilyn Johnson.

Monday Open Poetry Nights: The Buzz, EMU 9:00 p.m.

Sparrowgrass Poetry Forum's new "Poetic Achievement Awards" poetry contest. Enter one poem of 20 lines or less. Poems entered in the contest will be considered for publication in the Winter 2001 edition of "Treasured Poems of America." The grand prize winner will receive \$500. Mail poems to Sparrowgrass Poetry Forum, Dept. E, 609 Main St., PO Box 193, Sisterville, WV 26175.

New books of poetry by Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky and Charles Wright as well as the Library of America's publication of "American Poetry: The Twentieth Century, Volumes 1 and 2."

Poem-a-Day in your e-mail during the month of April: Sign up at the Random House Web site at www.randomhouse.com/knopf/poetry/. The site will automatically send poems by the likes of Raymond Carver, Langston Hughes and Stan Rice.

a long line formed immediately for signatures. A full house at a hushed Gerlinger Hall was spellbound for nearly two hours by Wright's calming and provocative verse. Wright believes that poetry is reborn with each new generation and that there is a sustained need for poetry in American society.

"Poetry finds new life in each new generation," Wright said. "The roots of poetry are just that — roots. Something is always going to grow. No matter how much they try to kill it, they aren't killing it; they are just pruning it."

It is as full blown as ever. Even though you may think it's a dying art, vis-a-vis film or the novel or the Internet, but there are still people walking around who find something necessary in the silence, the brevity and the truth poetry can give."

The author of 14 books, Wright still considers himself primarily a teacher and encourages his students to "read hard."

"It's nice to see young people picking up the banner and charging into the gunfire. It's a very exciting time for young people to be writing," Wright said.

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