
Regional

When poetry can be beautiful and subversive

The famous German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said about 200 years ago that a person should read a little poetry every day in order to sense the beauty around us. Today's poets see their craft as much more than that. They see it as a way to say important things in few words, in ways that cannot be expressed in normal prose.

One of those poets is Adrian Matejka, an assistant professor in the department of English Language and Literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

"We need poets to think about things we do not want to look at," said Matejka. "Poets should be the great interrogators of our culture."

Sometimes being an interrogator can get a poet's work banned. Perhaps one of the most famous cases is that of Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," which in 1881 was deemed obscene in Boston for its use of "explicit" language, but which today, of course, is considered an American classic.

"Poets can say things that you cannot say in prose and say them more efficiently," said Matejka. That does not mean that writing poetry is an easy job. It can take many hours, days, or even weeks to write a short poem. And the approach to writing poetry is quite different from one author to another. Some sit for hours scrabbling

Dr. Aldemaro Romero College Talk

words until they make sense. Others just sit and write almost without hesitation what they want to say but usually after thinking long and hard about the message they want to convey.

Matejka's wife, Stacey Lynn Brown – also a poet and an assistant professor in the department of English Language and Literature at SIUE- takes that approach. "She walks around with a poem in her mind for months, thinking about it and when she writes it down it is almost finished," said Matejka.

The way Matejka got into poetry was rather unusual. He never thought of becoming a poet until after when he went to college. In fact when he entered Indiana University he planned to study psychology and in one of the classes there was a girl he wanted to impress. She told him she liked poetry, so he told her he wrote poetry. He didn't. But after attending a poetry reading, he realized that that was what he wanted to do. "It sounded like music," he said.

He ended up obtaining dual bachelor's degrees in English Literature and psychology from Indiana University and his master's of fine arts in creative writing from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Still he does not consider what he learned in psychology a waste of effort. "I am really interested in the way the mind works," Matejka said. In fact, he has embarked on a project about Jack Johnson -the first African American world heavyweight champion- and is finding his knowledge of psychology quite useful for that project.

He also said that majoring in psychology was a way to appease his parents who thought that a profession ending with an "ology" was more likely to land him a job than being an English major.

Matejka has been a very productive writer in his short career, publishing poetry in both books written entirely by him and in anthologies. As a result, he has received numerous awards. His most recent book, "Myxology," has been praised by critics. In it he explores ideas about race, skin politics and cultural identity.

Matejka has been dealing with issues of race not only in his writings but also in his teaching of African American literature. And there is an obvious context in which he operates that is influenced by his African

American heritage, a context that provides him an interesting challenge in today's wave of globalization that is impacting poetry as much as any other area of society. Cultural contexts that were restricted to a particular time and place are now becoming global. "Internet is allowing people to communicate more poetry than before with many magazines moving online, allowing more people to disseminate their poetry to the whole world," said Matejka.

He added that in the classroom he is as enthusiastic about transmitting his passion for poetry as is the character played by Robin Williams in the film "Dead Poets Society." "How good a poem is comes from inside the reader," Matejka said. "I am not athletic enough or energetic enough to jump on tables and recite Whitman the way Williams did in the movie, but I like the idea that you teach poetry with enthusiasm. That is why poetry allows us to speak out. Because it has energy. It has enthusiasm."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.