

by Meg Moynihan

As an art form, poetry has spent the last fifty years being condemned by the public as dead, written and read only by a handful of snooty academics. As Susan B.A. Somers-Willett points out, however, this criticism has continued even in the face of the immense popularity of "slam" poetry, a performance-oriented view of the medium in which the line between poetry and theater blurs almost to the point of indistinction.

Since she both produces and critically evaluates poetry for a living, Somers-Willett possesses a unique perspective on this cultural renaissance. In addition to *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, a work of critical scholarship, she has also recently published *Roam*, her first book of verse, with the help of Southern Illinois University Press. As this year's runnerup in the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Competition, she will conduct a reading from *Roam* Thursday, April 6 in SIU's Harry T. Moore Auditorium. The reading is free and open to the public, and starts at 4 p.m.

Born in Ohio but raised in New Orleans, Susan B. Anthony Somers-Willett developed an early fascination not only with language, but also with the natural world around her. She began her academic career as an undergraduate biology major at Duke University and, though she eventually changed her concentration to writing, Somers-Willett maintains that science continues to be a significant area of professional interest.

After working briefly in the New York City publishing industry, Somers-Willett pursued both a master degree in creative writing and a doctorate in American literature from the University of Texas at Austin. In addition to cultivating a name for herself within national poetry-slam circles, Somers-Willett has had her work featured in numerous journals, including the Virginia Quarterly Review and the Beloit Poetry Review. She is currently a visiting professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where she teaches poetry, feminist literature, and African American literature. For more about Somers-Willett's poetry and criticism, log on to her website at <<http://www.susansw.com>>.

Recently *Nightlife* caught up with Somers-Willett to discuss the upcoming reading, her new poetry collection, and what famous geneticist Gregor Mendel might have said to the plants in his garden.

As someone with a background as both a poet and a critic, what do you hope to accomplish through your work?

I think this is really for future critics to decide. I can say that I'm influenced very much by feminist writers—Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Audre Lorde, for example—and I see myself writing in that tradition. I think their mix of activism and poetic expression exemplifies the poet's necessary engagement with the world around her.

I also write a lot about mothers and daughters, and *Roam* calls upon the voices of several women from history, literature, and myth—Eve, Joan of Arc, Ophelia, Circe to name a few—to reenvision their perspectives beyond the confines of their official narratives.

I'm also very invested in the role performance can play in poetry. I've been a part of three National Poetry Slam teams and have been part of the slam-poetry community for a decade now. I've also dabbled a bit in theater and I'm interested in exploring the thin but concrete line between the poetry reading and po-

etry's performance.

When I write, I often hear the sound of poems before I know what they're saying—a certain vowel sound needs to go here or there, or a certain cadence is needed to end a phrase. So although I write mostly in free verse, I'm also highly attuned to the prosody and music of the language I'm using. My background in performance informs that use of language—I'm always thinking about how the poem will be read aloud or, in some cases, be performed as a character piece.

What initially drew you to poetry over prose as a creative medium?

In truth, I'm a failed fiction writer. I started out writing fiction as an undergraduate, but whenever I started a new story I spent all my time describing the scene rather than focusing on action or dialogue. My fiction teacher, Elizabeth Cox, was smart enough to recommend trying my hand at poetry, since my attention to language was leaning toward the lyrical.

I read something recently that sums up my attraction to poetry well: it said that poetry is that which is unparaphrasable. When we talk about fiction or nonfiction, we can usually talk about it in broader strokes—a writer's unique prose style or diction. But with poetry, you have to quote the verse to fully convey what it's doing, because it can't be said any other way. That careful attention to saying it just so really appeals to me.

Does your critical work influence or inform your poetry (or vice-versa)? Do you find that the two overlap, topically or otherwise?

Absolutely. Most of my critical work is about poetry and performance, and my experience as a performance poet bears largely on what I have to say as a critic. I think that experience puts me in a unique position to talk about America's current obsession with spoken-word poetry, because I am less inclined to try to promote or pan slam poetry and I'm more open to discussing it as a cultural phenomenon, which has broadened a popular audience's relationship with verse.

How are the poems in *Roam* thematically connected? What kinds of experiences inspired their creation?

It's funny, I sent out the manuscript of *Roam* for seven years, but it was only at the very end of that time that I knew what its poems were about. Most generally, *Roam* is about my search for a sense of home after the loss of my father to cancer—my various physical and emotional travels I undertook to try to fill that void. My father died when I was a sophomore in college, at a time when my mother had just sold our house in New Orleans and moved to Arkansas. We sold or put in storage most of the things in my room. We gave most of my father's clothes away to Goodwill. So at the time I was dealing with the emotional displacement of his death, I was also experiencing a sense of physical displacement, this sense that I didn't have a familiar home to return to.

In *Roam*, sometimes I speak quite obviously in the first person about that experience; sometimes, I speak in the voices of personae to explore that loss. Looking back on it, I now realize that I was using these characters to give voice to something I wasn't ready to write about in the first person or talk about with my family. In this way, Joan of Arc's search for her father-God stands in for my emotional search after my dad's absence. Daedalus lamenting the loss of his son Icarus becomes

Susan B.A. Somers-Willett: LIVING POETRY ROAMS INTO CARBONDALE



my grandfather mourning his son. Many of the poems in *Roam* are about being purposefully lost in a moment of mourning—acknowledging the place of grief so to better understand it and to start the process of healing.

In addition to the focus of your upcoming book of criticism, what specific areas/authors/literary debates most engage you as a scholar and professor?

Right now, I'm very interested in poetry's place in public culture. Just fifteen years ago, critics were asking why poetry was ostensibly a dead art to the public, and now we are in an era of poetry's renaissance, not just in the traditional medium of print but in radio, television, film, the internet, and live performance. Today, it's impossible to board a bus or subway without being exposed to verse—whether by a Poetry in Motion placard or by the guy sitting next to you with hip-hop lyrics bristling from his iPod headphones. Now that public audiences are having a relationship with poetry, I think it's pertinent to ask about the nature and quality of this relationship as well as how public poetry projects navigate and

instruct this relationship.

How did your upbringing in New Orleans influence your poetic style?

Even though *Roam* is about traveling and getting lost in different voices and geographies, I still embrace the mantle of the Southern writer. New Orleans in particular was very formative for me, especially in the language and subjects I choose—growing up white in a predominantly black city has definitely influenced my diction and has encouraged me to explore race-based social inequality and black culture.

It also has informed a number of blues-inspired lyrics—although I wouldn't classify myself as a blues poet, it's a mode I feel pretty comfortable in. And then, of course, there's the general influence of music. New Orleans culture is music culture, so it makes sense that I'm invested in the musicality and rhythm of spoken language—to me, that's a natural extension of being a New Orleanian.

What are your plans for the future? Are there any new genres, mediums, or literary periods that you would like to investigate in

further detail?

I'm hard at work on a second book of poetry about the science, mathematics, and evolution of beauty entitled *A Natural Order*. Some ideas I am exploring in the book include: What would the cross-pollinated plants of Mendel say to him in the garden? How was Einstein's love for his first wife reflected in his theory of relativity? I'm interested in how natural phenomena reflect our experiences and connections with each other.

To me, science and poetry are very much linked, because what fuels each field is a passion for discovery and beauty. I see science as an aesthetic practice. With my new writing, I hope to contribute a new perspective on the phenomena that make up the art of the natural world—a voice which reflects a scientist's sense of intellectual rigor but which also is not ashamed of being curious and amazed.

who: Susan B.A. Somers-Willett
what: Crab Orchard Review poetry Award Series
where: SIU Faner Hall
Harry T. Moore Auditorium
when: Thursday, April 6



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