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Posted November 26, 2004

Ted Kooser, what you see is what you get

By [Elizabeth Lund](#)

My coworkers often remind me that poets are like the emperor who strutted around buck naked, thinking that only a select few could see his fine new clothing. We view ourselves as artistic and intellectually gifted, they say, yet others see us as arrogant, with egos too large to fit in any carriage. That's one reason mainstream readers don't have much use for us, I'm told.

My poet friends argue that people don't recognize the value of poetry because they don't encounter it regularly in the media – in newspapers, on TV, on radio programs.

There's some truth to both views.

Yet even when newspapers do cover poetry, "average readers" often find little they can relate to. The faces they see in poetry's mirror look nothing like their own, they say.

That was not the case with Ted Kooser, poet laureate of the United States. When my interview of him ran Nov. 16 (www.csmonitor.com/books/index.html), several people in the newsroom told me, "He sounds like such a delightful man. I bet I'd like his poetry, too." No other poet had ever inspired such comments.

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Another first: the Kooser piece made the Top 10 list of Monitor stories for that day (as determined by the number of hits to csmonitor.com). Consequently, I'm still answering reader e-mails about which of his books they should read first.

Part of this response came from the fact that Kooser's life decisions, as well as his stylistic choices, are easy to understand. People saw their own stories in his.

Equally important – and what really struck me during the interview – was Kooser's openness. He didn't seem to have the practiced persona that many writers do (perhaps as a form of self defense?). I never had to wonder, "Where does the persona end and the real man begin?"

As a reporter, I want to glimpse the private person, the inner self that produces the poems. But many people hide that essential core behind a well-polished public mask. For a poet talking about what it means to be truly human, a rigid public facade is tantamount to a death-mask. Those are the worst interviews.

I didn't have that problem with Kooser, however. Everything about him was delightfully surprising, even during our initial chat, when I requested the interview. I expected an answering machine to pick up after two rings, but instead I heard, "Ted Kooser."

"I'm free all this week," he said, when I made my request. "How about tomorrow?" (Normally it takes weeks or months to set up a time.)

Mr. Kooser was so honest and approachable during our conversation, even when I asked him about an unflattering Q & A that the New York Times magazine had run earlier that week. "Yes, that was a bit peculiar," he said without a trace of anger. "But I liked the picture." Many poets – myself included – would not have been so generous, especially since that reporter had taken 10 days of his time, he told me.

But Kooser didn't let that unpleasantness affect his interaction with me. He offered details that some writers could have blown out of proportion, such as the fact that his dogs mean a great deal to him ("They're devoted to me, and I to them.") or that the University of Nebraska discontinued his fellowship after the first year of his master's program. (He finished the degree by taking night classes.)

Kooser gave me an hour of his time. (Many people want to wrap things up in 20 or 30 minutes). He even offered to chat with me again if I needed more quotes.

Perhaps he is always that generous, especially since he understands how reporters operate. (Both his wife and son are journalists.) Whatever the reason, Kooser's approach becomes a bridge for both reporters and readers. He's a conduit of sorts, which allows him to reach a wide audience.

Other writers could also serve as gateways to the art form, even if their work isn't as approachable as the current poet laureate's.

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Personal stories – and how they relate to the writing – can be very effective hooks, especially if told with a bit of humor.

Subjects who hold tightly to their masks, however, will never have the same impact. Why interview people who never relinquish their death-grip? Why read their poems?

Kooser's growing reputation as a mirror for mainstream readers may help him tremendously when he attends the American Library Association's Midwinter Meeting in January. (He recently addressed the National Council of Teachers of English convention.) Kooser plans to work with teachers and librarians because both groups have an unparalleled opportunity to introduce people to verse.

His approach may also help with another initiative he recently announced: He will write a weekly column about poetry that newspapers across the country can run for free. The Poetry Foundation in Chicago will provide distribution.

Convincing newspapers to give up space for free won't be easy. But if Kooser's prose is as engaging as he was on the phone, he may prove to editors and readers that they can see themselves in poetry's mirror. He may even show that the emperor isn't bare-bottomed after all.

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