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UNL Professor Ted Kooser Appointed U.S. Poet Laureate

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Lincoln, Neb., August 12th, 2004 —

Ted Kooser, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln visiting professor of English, will be the next Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the [Library of Congress \(HTTP://WWW.LOC.GOV/POETRY\)](http://WWW.LOC.GOV/POETRY), Librarian of Congress James H. Billington announced today.

"Ted Kooser is a major poetic voice for rural and small-town America and the first poet laureate chosen from the Great Plains," Billington said today. "His verse reaches beyond his native region to touch on universal themes in accessible ways."

Kooser will take up his duties in the fall, opening the library's annual literary series on Oct. 7 with a reading of his work. Kooser succeeds Poet Laureate Louise Gluck.

The author of 10 collections of poetry and prose including "Local Wonders, Seasons in the Bohemian Alps," (2002) published by University of Nebraska Press, Kooser was born in Ames, Iowa, in 1939 and attended public school there before earning his bachelor's degree at Iowa State University (1962). He taught school for one year before moving to Nebraska to pursue graduate school. He received his master's degree at the University of Nebraska in 1968. He has lived all of his life in Nebraska and Iowa.

Kooser's most recent work is an upcoming University of Nebraska Press book, "The Poetry Home Repair Manual," due out soon, following "Delights & Shadows" (2004). His other collections of poetry include "Sure Signs" (1980), which received the Society of Midland Authors Prize for the best book of poetry by a Midwestern writer published in that year; "One World at a Time" (1985); "Weather Central" (1994); and "Winter Morning Walks: One Hundred Postcards to Jim Harrison" (2000), winner of the 2001 Nebraska Book Award for Poetry. "Local Wonders" also won the Nebraska Book Award for Nonfiction in 2003. The book was also chosen as the Best Book Written by a Midwestern Writer for 2002 by Friends of American Writers, and it won the Gold Award for Autobiography in ForeWord Magazine's Book of the Year Awards.

Kooser is also the author, with his longtime friend Jim Harrison, of "Braided Creek: A Conversation in Poetry" (2003), for which the two poets received the 2003 Award for Poetry from the Society of Midland Authors. Among Kooser's other awards and honors are two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, the Pushcart Prize, the Stanley Kunitz Prize, the James Boatwright Prize and a Merit Award from the Nebraska Arts Council.

Kooser said he was surprised and amazed to be chosen for the honor.

"I'm actually pretty overwhelmed and dazed right now... discombobulated," he said. "I feel like my phone is the switchboard for the town of Garland!" For the last 20 years, he and his wife, Kathleen Rutledge, have lived on 62 acres of hills and trees about three miles from the village of Garland northwest of Lincoln. "Local Wonders" is much about life there.

"My poems are about the world I see about me," he said. "Poetry can offer readers fresh new ways of looking at the ordinary, everyday world.

"In my most recent book, for example, there's a poem about a tattooed man I saw at a yard sale, a poem about two young women I observed in a cosmetics department. Then there are poems that are not about people, but things, such as a five-subject spiral notebook or a stand of old lilac canes."

Kooser's career path to become a writer was not typical.

"I wanted more than anything to learn how to write poetry and I spent a lot of time with the late Karl Shapiro, who had won a Pulitzer for poetry and who was teaching at Nebraska then," Kooser said. "By the end of the first year it was clear to me and to my adviser at the university that I wasn't cut out for academic work. So I dropped out of graduate school and went to work at a life insurance company, for no other reason than that they had an entry-level opening. I'd never had a course in business or had any interest in it. But it was a job and paid the bills and I was done at 5 o'clock every day, no student themes to stay up late laboring over. I finished my master's degree by taking night classes over the next few years.

"For 35 years I worked behind a desk in the life insurance business, getting up at 4:30 or 5 every day to write my poems. This gave me a couple of hours to write before I had to put on my suit and tie and set out for the office. At work I was first a person who answers letters from policyholders, then a medical underwriter, and finally a public relations officer. I retired when I was 60, shortly after I had undergone surgery and radiation for oral cancer. One of my books, 'Winter Morning Walks: 100 Postcards to Jim Harrison,' is a series of daily poems I wrote while I was recovering from radiation. I had a wonderful doctor at the University of Nebraska Medical Center and my health is good."

Since he retired from the insurance business, he has had more time for writing and has published three books. He teaches poetry and nonfiction writing as a visiting professor at UNL and is on faculty for the Nebraska Summer Writers' Conference, an annual conference. His classes for the coming semester have been canceled, he said, because he expects to travel to Washington about once a month to do readings at the Library of Congress.

The poet laureate's job carries with it few specific duties so writers can work on their own projects. The post includes an office at the Library of Congress, a \$35,000 salary and an obligation to deliver and organize readings. Previous poets laureate include Robert Frost, Gwendolyn Brooks and Rita Dove.

"I really want to throw myself into this and do what I can to further people's interest in poetry," Kooser said. "I see part of my job as being a promoter of poetry of all kinds."

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Associated Media Files:

- [Ted Kooser color JPEG \(http://ucommxsr1.unl.edu/downloadables/photo/20040812koosercolor.jpg\)](http://ucommxsr1.unl.edu/downloadables/photo/20040812koosercolor.jpg)
- [Ted Kooser black & white JPEG \(http://ucommxsr1.unl.edu/downloadables/photo/20040812kooserbw.jpg\)](http://ucommxsr1.unl.edu/downloadables/photo/20040812kooserbw.jpg)



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