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America finds its new lyrical voice in Ted Kooser, poet of the Midwest

By [Amber Jenkins](#)

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Ted Kooser is the new poet laureate of the United States. Unfortunately, unless you're a dedicated peruser of the *Times'* "Book" page or the *Post's* "Poet's Choice" column, you probably haven't heard of him. Of course it is up to debate how important the poet laureate actually is to the average American, and there are rumors that the selection process is a mess of politicking anyway, but this year the Library of Congress' choice deserves a second look. Whereas the past decade of poet laureates has included such familiar names and literary heavyweights as Robert Pinsky, Stanley Kunitz, and Louise Gluck, Ted Kooser is not a name one frequently encounters in the usual places. He is not represented in the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, and he hasn't appeared in the *New Yorker* in recent memory. So who is he? What's his poetry like? And why, exactly, was he of all people chosen to be the representative poet of our nation?

Well, it turns out Ted Kooser *is* a popular poet -- just not so much on the East Coast, or the West Coast, or in any of the typical literary hubs for that matter. Apparently though, in his homeland of the Midwest, he's a really big deal. His collections have won him such local honors as the Nebraska Book Award for Nonfiction and a Merit Award from the Nebraska Arts Council, and his poems can be found in publications like *Prairie Schooner*, *The Ohio Review*, and *Nebraska Poet's Calendar*. Ted Kooser is what is (often pejoratively) referred to as a "regional poet" -- a poet who writes about and appeals to readers from lesser-know/less-literarily-explored areas of the country (i.e., not New York, New England, or California). His latest book, "Delights and Shadows" (Copper Canyon Press, \$15), released in May of this year, proves this point. The poems, in a short, often-imagistic manner, depict small-town America. His subject is a world of fishing, grasshoppers, creamed corn, and lilacs. He writes about a simple life in a clear, easy-to-read way. And this is why people love him. He doesn't make obscure references or rely heavily on abstractions. His poems mean what they say. They frequently begin with an image or short narrative and end with a revelation of the truth or the particular emotion the image or story is meant to evoke.

It sounds rather simplistic, and, in some ways, it is. After reading "Delights and Shadows," I decided that overall, it left the scholarly-critic side of me discontented. The four parts of the book didn't seem to be linked in any way, and the work as a whole lacked an overarching structure. Individual poems were flawed as well. Kooser often presents moments which sound poetically profound but which, on a second reading, are revealed as ultimately spurious. For example, the epigrammatic poem "Starlight" reads in its entirety: "All night, soft rain from the distant past. / No wonder I sometimes waken as a child." Even worse is his nearly-embarrassing sentimentality. In an elegy to his father, he writes "I miss you every day--the heartbeat / under your necktie, the

hand cupped / on the back of my neck, Old Spice / in the air, your voice delighted with stories" ("Father"), and in a poem about his mother's death he writes "...my voice broke, / for it came to me, nearly sixty, I was still / my mother's boy, that boy for the rest of my life" ("Pearl").

And yet, for all the retrospective doubts, in the short hour when I was actually immersed in the book, reading it for the first time, I loved it. Finishing one poem, I automatically was drawn to the next. His language is soothing and quiet. The even lines and concise bodies of the poem are visually appealing on the page. Moments of description, like when he depicts the "oily light," the "tick of chopsticks," and the "odors whose shapes are like flowers" of a Vietnamese Cafe in "In January," are fresh and memorable. He has a knack for making beautiful the commonplace and for conjuring an atmosphere of timelessness around his small, humble world. When he shows us his grandmother throwing out the dishwasher, he describes the water flying through the air as "...a glorious rainbow / with an empty dishpan swinging at one end" ("Dishwater").

Kooser's poetry is, above all, pleasant to read. It's comforting -- never edgy or dangerous -- and while it may not make it onto the standard high school and university reading lists alongside Frost or Whitman, it definitely has a place in the world of contemporary American poetry. Kooser is a poet for the common man, the individual who wants poetry to be easy and warm, to remind him of home and the good old days. And it is in this sense that he is a good choice for poet laureate. He is a poet who could, with more exposure, have mass appeal -- not necessarily in academia, but among those who just like to read a little verse sometimes -- nothing too intense. The poet laureate should be a poet that the people are interested in, a poet who is accessible. On a large scale, Americans don't read poetry at all, so maybe, hopefully, a poet like Ted Kooser is a good way to get them started.

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Amber Jenkins, I think you just might be a bit of a snob. You write, "in the short hour when I was actually immersed in the book, reading it for the first time, I loved it. ([Continued...](#))