

Would That All God's Children Were Poets

Casualene Meyer

As *BYU Studies* poetry editor, I have been asked to describe how I and the other judges choose poems for prizes and publication. Strong poems are more than snapshots and certainly more than security camera footage; they cannot merely recount great stories, pieces of advice, or beautiful scenes. Insightful and elegant poems combine a view with a vision and pay attention to the crafting of words, their sounds and meanings. Beyond this, poems published in *BYU Studies* should show awareness that, while they are written to Mormon readers who desire to be faithful, these poems should be universally accessible and appealing, regardless of the reader's background. All great poetry can give nourishment and pleasure to its readers whether or not they understand entirely or agree completely with the worldview and allusions of the writer.

Since *BYU Studies* welcomes and receives overtly religious poetry, I can sense that hurt and confusion might result if poets are not published and therefore feel that both their talent and their faith have been rejected. Sometimes poets feel that poems are like testimonies—personal expressions of truths as the poet understands them—that should receive publication at an open microphone simply by virtue of the bearer being moved upon by the Spirit. I could reply that, in reality, even the content and intent of testimony bearing has been the subject of inspired critique by Elder Dallin H. Oaks (quoting President Spencer W. Kimball)¹ and Elder David A. Bednar.² It is safe to say that both content and craft must be strong, and that writing about the most sublime experiences and impressions in an appropriate, strong way is hard work. My favorite perspective on the subject comes from American poet John Ciardi:

I had a lovely exchange at the *Saturday Review* with, I guess, a sweet lady. I had rejected some of her poems. I have to reject a lot of them. I get about 500 a week, and I can only accept two. But she took my rejection personally, as many people do, and wrote me a hot letter. I had not remembered the poem, but she said, "I suppose you rejected my poem because it was about God." I had to reply. "Dear Madam: No, I did not reject your poem because it was about God. I rejected it because I could not conquer a feeling that you were not equal to your subject."³

As writers, none of us are really equal to our subject when the subject is God (or his children or creations, for that matter); nevertheless, like the noble and great Abraham, each of us can say, "I have taken upon me to speak [of] the Lord, which am but dust and ashes" (to paraphrase Genesis 18:27).

Professionals, PhDs, and Panelists

Once I have chosen the poems I feel are aesthetically strong and appropriate for *BYU Studies* (even as I recognize that these are not all of equal weight), I pass them on to the judges for rating and combine their opinions to rank the poems. Each year I choose a different panel of judges. In 2010, the judges included two men and one woman, all of them academics (*BYU Studies* is, after all, an academic journal and BYU a dedicated academic school as well as a nice place to meet people), and all of them literary minded.

I think all our poets would enjoy sitting down and visiting informally with the panelists and would enjoy associating with them as I have, so I will introduce you to the judges in their own words and share with you their criteria for good poetry.

Justin Blessinger. Dr. Blessinger is an Associate Professor of English and an award-winning creative writer. He was raised on the Fort Peck Sioux and Assiniboine reservation in northeast Montana, where many of his stories are set. Recently, his work has appeared in *The Bear Deluxe* magazine and *South Dakota Review*. He lives in Madison, South Dakota, with his wife, Christina, and their two daughters.

Of poetry, Blessinger says: "I respond to poetry that makes me see an event or artifact again, for the first time. Details that surprise but do not thwart the mind's eye assist in this. Poetry should convey something, if not universal, certainly important. The best poetry translates the familiar into the alien and back again, giving me a gift to take back into the quotidian spans of life, to transform my experience of the mundane into the momentous, even, at times, divine."

Sirje Kiin. Dr. Kiin describes herself briefly in terms of her literary achievements: "I have published seven books in Estonian and in Finnish.

I am an Estonian writer and literary scientist, with a PhD in comparative literature. I have written biographies, poetry, essays, political history books, reviews, and literary science articles (see www.sirjekiin.net). Also, I have translated ten books from Finnish and Russian into Estonian.”

Kiin expresses her idea of strong poetry in these words: “Good poetry needs for me verbal freshness, poetical images, unusual associations, and strong rhythm, but sometimes it is enough to just have peaceful description of small moments of everyday life, like one Estonian poet wrote once in ‘March’ (in raw translation):

my fingers are not freezing anymore
when I choose a phone number
in a street phone box.

Now, when nobody even remembers those phone boxes, this little poem tells even more.”

Jack Walters. Dr. Walters introduces himself as a writer and a business professor: “I came late to academe, leaving the private sector at thirty-five

BYU Studies Poetry Contest First-Prize Winners

2010	David J. Passey, “City Dog”
2009	Norma S. Bowkett, “Clocks Have Not Stopped”
2008	Christopher C. Lund, “Tunica Doloris”
2007	MaryJan Gay Munger, “After Sorrow”
2006	Michael Hicks, “Day Seven”
2004	Richard Tice, “As Fire”
2003	Michael Hicks, “Museum of Ancient Life”
2002	Donnell Hunter, “Chilean Spring”
2001	Michael Hicks, “Deluge”
2000	Ellen Gregory, “A Riddle for Didymus”
1999	Ken Haubrock, “Three Women in Church”
1998	James Richards, “Adam’s Song”
1996	Michael Hicks, “Altarpiece”
1995	Jennie Rae Leishman, “This Woman Is Full”

To read these poems, go to byustudies.byu.edu.

to return to school to complete my master's and doctoral degrees. I worked as an academic administrator for ten years but did not really enjoy it or believe that it was my calling. When I shifted to full-time faculty work here [at Dakota State University], enjoyment of my work and life in general went up a lot. I recently completed writing a book about positive management, a new subfield in my discipline. The book is research based but has substantial creative content, in that it is essentially a persuasive essay about how organizations could perform better if the tenets of positive management were more widely implemented. It will be published and made available in summer 2010. At some point in the future, I may again write one of these 'airplane books,' as they are called, because executives buy them to read on plane trips, but my true goal is fiction writing. Nothing outside of family relationships gives me such happiness and satisfaction."

Of good poetry, Walters says: "I look for three things in reading poetry. Most important, it must draw pictures in my mind. If they can be living and moving pictures, it is even better, but I can be satisfied with still images, too. Second, I look for broad understandability to readers. The more people that can relate to the story being told, however far it may be from their personal experience, the higher I evaluate a poem. Finally, I have a personal preference for free over rhymed verse because I find rhymed verse to be too confining. While it may be true that the greatest poets can achieve goals one and two while rhyming, most people are not 'greatest poets,' so removing the rhyming limitation widens the sweep of storytelling and makes the story seem more real."

In summary, our judges are, to modify a definition from William Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, human beings reading as human beings,⁴ but with an aesthetic edge born of making literary appreciation a profession or avocation.

Promising Poems

Each year *BYU Studies* sponsors a poetry contest. The winners are published, and prizes are given. The deadline for submission is December 31. Last year's contest drew an abundance of entries rich in variety, faith, and earnestness. As poetry editor, I would do well to assume that all poetry I receive is a valiant effort in verse, so how, given so much desire on the part of the poets, could I choose a "winner," especially if poetry is a matter of the heart and of preference, and it would be quite heartless and preferential to say some poems are worthy and others are not? The reality is that sincerity of heart does not equal quality of art, and sometimes bad poetry happens to good people.

If one draws a parallel between poems and “spirits,” a verse from the Book of Abraham helps illustrate in some degree why all poetry exists in a hierarchy, and that some can and even should be deemed noble and great, or prize-worthy: “And the Lord said unto me: These two facts do exist, that there are two spirits, one being more intelligent than the other; there shall be another more intelligent than they; I am the Lord thy God, I am more intelligent than they all” (Abraham 3:19).

The task, then, of the poetry editor for *BYU Studies* is to try to discern among all the poems received which are the stronger, and even the strongest, and recommend them for prizes and publication. All poetry is not created equal, so it is not just a matter of granting open admission to a poetry pantheon for any verse that exists; some poetry should be not only appreciated but actually admired, and like the criterion that “he that is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 23:11), the best poetry serves readers with the greatest substance and purity. Good poems may touch us, and earnest readers, like the woman who touched the border of Christ’s garment, instinctively seek them out and touch *them*. In turn, the good poems give us a portion of their power and virtue, leaving us healed.

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1. Dallin H. Oaks, “Testimony,” *Ensign* 38 (May 2008): 26, citing Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 138.

2. David A. Bednar, “More Diligent and Concerned at Home,” *Ensign* 39 (November 2009): 18.

3. John Ciardi, “How Does a Poem Mean?” *New Era* 17 (August 1987): 44.

4. “Definition,” in William Wordsworth, “Preface,” *Lyrical Ballads* (1800).