

Hillsborough-area poets take a turn for the verse

Correspondent

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HILLSBOROUGH — “America’s worst poet” – that’s how Hillsborough’s Art Fetting once heard himself reviewed on a radio show with Earl Nightingale.

Fetting was used to scathing reviews – his first poem met 26 rejections before it was published. But he went on to teach courses for writers on overcoming rejections and marketing their work.

These days, Fetting, 85, regularly shares his poems with a gentler audience: Hillsborough’s Orange Dog Poets Society. The group meets from 9 to 10:30 a.m. every third Saturday at The Whistle on Hash Street in Hillsborough.

Despite Hillsborough’s reputation (named “America’s Little Literary Town” by The Wall Street Journal” and “Best Literary Small Town in America,” by Garden & Gun Magazine), local poets don’t attract as much attention as best-selling novelists, group coordinator Frank Doonan said.

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“One of the main purposes is to give a voice to ‘closet’ poets – to encourage people to express themselves and develop their poetry ... to bring poetry to the people and encourage people to come to poetry,” he said.

“A lot of people will tell you, ‘I write poetry, but it’s no good.’ ... There’s a lot of poets around, whose poems just disappear into the nebulous.”

At a recent meeting, the smell of fresh coffee floated over a range of styles: Doonan’s interpretation of a Chinese poem from the seventh century A.D., Fetting’s rhyming verses on overcoming writer’s block, and Hillsborough poet laureate Aaron Belz’s biography of actor Ernest Borgnine, written Mad Libs-style with fill-in-the-blanks categories.

‘Smellin’ flowers’

“Poetry just kind of helps me to get clarity in how I go through the world and how I see the world,” said Rosemary McCarthy-Mareka.

The Efland resident began writing poetry while working with children in nature education programs. Since then, she’s continued to write – usually in the woods, with pad of paper in hand.

Studying stress-reduction techniques, she's also learned to introduce adults to poetry to help them become more mindful. She seeks out the Orange Dog Poets for a boost of inspiration.

"The group's so accomplished and so supportive. It's given me a lot of confidence in my writing," she said.

Many of the Orange Dog Poets have turned that mindfulness, and attentiveness, to celebrating Hillsborough. From The Whistle to Cup-A-Joe to Matthew's Chocolates, town landmarks display odes written by local poets.

Fettig's original, much-rejected poem actually calls for more of this appreciative attentiveness. The poem advises those weary from trying to "keep up with the Joneses":

"Just livin' can be such a pleasant thing / Start talkin' and walkin' and smellin' flowers / Instead of worrying away the hours / And you'll find every day like the first of spring."

The 'gatekeepers'

As he closes in on his first year as laureate, Belz said he'd like to see the local poets engage with each other and the community on a deeper level.

Belz has read his poems everywhere from coffee shops to prisons. He gained national recognition for posting a Craigslist ad, proposing to hire himself out at an hourly rate to write poems.

In the past year, he's joined Fettig and Doonan to read to some of Hillsborough's senior citizens.

"I just realized what a blessing it is to people to bring literature to them, because otherwise they're shut in," Belz said.

But, he said, he'd like to stir up "peaceful" Hillsborough even more. He envisions events where poets critique each other's work and and creative events to draw people in.

"I would love to see more practical attention to the craft and way the poetry is involved in the community," Belz said.

This week, Belz and the Orange Dog Poets will celebrate National Poetry Month with extra poetry readings on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. Special events continue into May, with a Spring Garden Tour reading at Ayr Mount and a game-show style live poetry event at Motorco in Durham.

The Orange Dog Poets, Belz said, provide a key starting point for connecting more fully with the community.

"It's good to have a gatekeeper for the art (of poetry). It's good to have a group that is keeping track of what's happening locally, and providing a venue for others to come visit."

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ORANGE DOG POETS SOCIETY EVENTS

▪ Wednesday, April 15, 2 p.m.

Orange Dog Poets Read at Soltys Adult Day Care Center

105 Meadowlands Dr # 105

▪ Thursday, April 16, 6 p.m.

National Poetry Month Reading

Orange County Library, 137 W. Margaret Lane

Four local poets read from their work and discuss the poets who've most influenced them.

▪ Saturday, April 18, 9 a.m.

The Whistle, 250 S. Nash Street

The Orange Dog Poets Society is giving its third annual poetry reading to celebrate National Poetry Month. Presenters will be current and past Hillsborough poet laureates, ODPS poets and special guest, Sara Claytor, published poet and resident of Carrboro, NC. Purple Crow will provide book sales and display table; coffee, tea, and hot chocolate available at the bar. Brunch items to be brought by poets and fans.

▪ Wednesday, April 22, 7 p.m.

Allan Gurganus Reading

Hillsborough Gallery of Arts, 121 North Churton Street

Wine and Cheese Reception to follow. Books will be available for purchase and signing.

▪ Saturday, May 16, 10 a.m.

Spring Garden Tour Reading

Ayr Mount Poets' Walk, 376 St. Mary's Road

Orange Dog Poets station themselves along the Poets' Walk to give live readings to guests as they pass by. Poems celebrate theme of "Articulture....Hillsborough - where garden and arts flourish."

▪ Sunday, May 17, 7 p.m.

Writers in the Ring

Motorco, 723 Rigsbee Ave, Durham

Hillsborough Poet Laureate Aaron Belz and others participate in game-show style live poetry writing event.

Each poet draws a prompt (an event, a location, and an object) bingo-style;

Each poet sits at a laptop and has 6 minutes to write a poem;

As they write, their screens are projected for all the audience to see.