

For Norwalk's poet laureate the city is her oyster for pearls of poetry

By Christina Hennessy

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Laurel Peterson, an author and poet, is Norwalk's first poet laureate — one of only a handful in the state. For the next year, she will work to foster a love and appreciation of poetry among the city's residents and visitors. less

[Laurel Peterson](#) swivels around and arches her neck slightly to peer at a row of books on the shelves above her head. As she runs her hands along the spines, she finds her quarry. Victorious, she smiles and coaxes the medium-size paperback out of the pack.

"Here it is," she says, placing [Billy Collins](#)' "Poetry 180" on her desk. "He did about two or three of these when he was (U.S.) Poet Laureate" (2001-03), she says of his collections of poems whose subtitle reveals his motive — "A Turning Back to Poetry." Collins' hope was to assemble short, contemporary

poems that could be enjoyed by all.

“Poetry has gotten this capital ‘P’ reputation,” says Peterson, on a recent afternoon in her office at [Norwalk Community College](#). “People get worried that they are not going to understand it, or it’s going to be too hard for them. But these are just so accessible. I love him for that, because he encourages you just to enjoy what’s there.”

This hesitation toward an art form that humans have long employed to memorialize historical events, tell tales, express emotion, sing one’s praises and ponder life’s mysteries seems counterintuitive. For Peterson, a published poet and English professor at the college, it is a strange phenomenon, given we often, as children, learn the beauty and value of words through the lyrical cadence of rhyme and continue our immersion in poetry when we listen to lyric-driven music.

She has a chance to change that for the next year. She is Norwalk’s first poet laureate, an honorary position bequeathed to her earlier this month by Mayor [Harry Rilling](#). The idea is to infuse poetry into the everyday life of Norwalk residents. Although Connecticut has had a poet laureate since 1985, it has only been in recent years that about a dozen towns and cities have established the post.

“We hope the poet laureate will introduce poetry in our schools and instill in people of all ages some excitement and passion for reading poetry,” Rilling says. “I’d love to see people take a chance and even write some poetry.”

Peterson sees a city that is a canvas for poetry and an inspiration for new works. This month, which marks the 20th anniversary of National Poetry Month, one of her first initiatives has launched more than two dozen snippets of verse in the interior panels of city buses. She created a couple, area poets contributed a handful and lines from well-known poets rounded it out. Other cityscapes, such as the traffic boxes, may soon feature poetry.

As for new works, she hopes places such as Oyster Shell Park (which inspired one of her recent poems), the downtown, the beaches, the transit hubs and the architecture serve as a prompt.

“This town has all these disparate, interesting and amazing pieces to it. I’d love people of all ages to write a poem in response and then have a contest at the end of the year. Let’s have a big celebration, have people read them and hear each other’s voices.”

Since she was a child, growing up in Redding, Peterson has been a writer, though it’s hard for her to pin down exactly when the prose turned to poetry.

“I’ve written since I was a child — stories, journals or whatever. It was always rewarded.”

Later, in her undergraduate and graduate studies, she connected with teachers who spurred her even further.

The encouragement paid off, as the Norwalk resident has seen her poems make the pages of numerous literary journals, and her two poetry chapbooks, including “That’s the Way the Music Sounds” and “Talking to the Mirror.” She also has been an editor, including a span at Inkwell, and on a collection of essays. She has long read other poets, starting out early with [A.A. Milne](#). Later, she was captivated by the work of [Mark Doty](#) and Sharon Olds. As to her style, she writes primarily lyrical and narrative poems. “I’m not a formalist; they are free verse.”

Her fingers are nimble, however, and they do not dwell solely in the poetic form. She has penned a mystery novel that will be out in May. It’s her first published mystery, though she has written several.

“Poetry captures a moment and it allows me, at least, to explore what that moment is and what its connection to other moments is. Long-form narrative, like a novel, is more about exploring motivation, what makes a character do something,” she says.

Next year, she will have a book published of ekphrastic poems, which are either a response to artwork or to a character contained on canvas.

“I let them call to me,” she says of the visual beauties, which she espied at [the Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) and during her travels. Challenges such as these help her to look at her artistic currency anew.

“For anyone who is serious about writing, the challenge is to move beyond received language, things we say because they are what immediately come to mind. That’s cliché, but it’s also just comfortable,” she says. “If you want to capture an experience, the challenge is to show it to us in a way we’ve never seen before. That means you can’t use everyday language; it’s something different. And that’s a slow process, as any change is.”

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