

## June 10, 2015

### Librarian of Congress Appoints Juan Felipe Herrera Poet Laureate

Librarian of Congress James H. Billington today announced the appointment of Juan Felipe Herrera as the Library's 21st Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, for 2015-2016. Herrera will take up his duties in the fall, participating in the Library of Congress National Book Festival on **Saturday, September 5** and opening the Library's annual literary season with a reading of his work at the Coolidge Auditorium on **Tuesday, September 15**.

"I see in Herrera's poems the work of an American original—work that takes the sublimity and largesse of "Leaves of Grass" and expands upon it," Billington said. "His poems engage in a serious sense of play—in language and in image—that I feel gives them enduring power. I see how they champion voices, traditions and histories, as well as a cultural perspective, which is a vital part of our larger American identity."

Herrera, who succeeds Charles Wright as Poet Laureate, is the first Hispanic poet to serve in the position. He said, "This is a mega-honor for me, for my family and my parents who came up north before and after the Mexican Revolution of 1910—the honor is bigger than me. I want to take everything I have in me, weave it, merge it with the beauty that is in the Library of Congress, all the resources, the guidance of the staff and departments, and launch it with the heart-shaped dreams of the people. It is a miracle of many of us coming together."

Herrera joins a long line of distinguished poets who have served in the position, including Natasha Trethewey, Philip Levine, W. S. Merwin, Kay Ryan, Charles Simic, Donald Hall, Ted Kooser, Louise Glück, Billy Collins, Stanley Kunitz, Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass and Rita Dove.

The new Poet Laureate is the author of 28 books of poetry, novels for young adults and collections for children, most recently "Portraits of Hispanic American Heroes" (2014), a picture book showcasing inspirational Hispanic and Latino Americans. His most recent book of poems is "Senegal Taxi" (2013).

Herrera was born in Fowler, California, in 1948. As the son of migrant farm workers, he moved around often, living in tents and trailers along the road in Southern California, and attended school in a variety of small towns from San Francisco to San Diego. In 1972 he graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) with a bachelor's degree in social anthropology. He then attended Stanford University, where he received a master's degree in social anthropology, and in 1990 received a Masters of Fine Arts at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Herrera has written over a dozen poetry collections, including "Half the World in Light: New and Selected Poems" (2008), which received the National Book Critics Circle Award and the International Latino Book Award. He is also a celebrated young adult and children's book author. His honors include the Américas Award for both "Cinnamon Girl: letters found inside a cereal box" (2005) and "Crashboomlove: A Novel in Verse" (1999), as well as the Independent Publisher Book Award for "Featherless / Desplumado" (2005), the Ezra Jack Keats Award for

"Calling the Doves" (1995) and the Pura Belpré Author Honor Award for both "Portraits of Hispanic American Heroes" and "Laughing Out Loud, I Fly" (1998).

For his poetry, Herrera has received two Latino Hall of Fame Poetry Awards, a PEN USA National Poetry Award, the PEN Oakland / Josephine Miles Award, a PEN / Beyond Margins Award, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and the Stanford University Chicano Fellows.

Herrera has served as the chair of the Chicano and Latin American Studies Department at California State University, Fresno, and held the Tomas Rivera Endowed Chair in the Creative Writing Department at the University of California, Riverside, where he taught until retiring in 2015. He is currently a visiting professor in the Department of American Ethnic Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. Elected as a chancellor for the Academy of American Poets in 2011, he also served as the Poet Laureate of California from 2012-2015.

## **Background of the Laureateship**

The Poet Laureate is selected for a one-year term by the Librarian of Congress. The choice is based on poetic merit alone and has included a wide variety of poetic styles.

The Library keeps to a minimum the specific duties required of the Poet Laureate, who opens the literary season in the fall and closes it in May. Laureates, in recent years, have initiated poetry projects that broaden the audiences for poetry.

In 2013-2014 Natasha Trethewey launched "Where Poetry Lives," a series of on-location reports as part of the PBS NewsHour's Poetry Series. These reports, in locations across the country, explored societal issues through poetry's focused lens. For more information, visit [www.pbs.org/newshour/tag/where-poetry-lives/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/tag/where-poetry-lives/) ([external link](#)).

Earlier, Rita Dove brought a program of poetry and jazz to the Library's literary series, along with a reading by young Crow Indian poets and a two-day conference titled "Oil on the Waters: The Black Diaspora," featuring panel discussions, readings and music. Robert Hass sponsored a major conference on nature writing called "Watershed," which continues today as a national poetry competition for elementary, middle and high-school students, titled "River of Words." Robert Pinsky initiated his Favorite Poem Project, which energized a nation of poetry readers to share their favorite poems in readings across the country and in audio and video recordings. Billy Collins instituted the website Poetry180, [www.loc.gov/poetry/180/](http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/), which brought a poem a day into high-school classrooms in all parts of the country via the central announcement system.

Ten years ago, Ted Kooser created a free weekly newspaper column, at [www.americanlifeinpoetry.org](http://www.americanlifeinpoetry.org) ([external link](#)), that features a brief poem by a contemporary American poet and an introduction to the poem by Kooser. Donald Hall participated in the first-ever joint poetry readings of the U.S. Poet Laureate and British Poet Laureate Andrew Motion in a program called "Poetry Across the Atlantic," co-sponsored by the Poetry Foundation. Kay Ryan

launched "Poetry for the Mind's Joy" in 2009-2010, a project that focused on the poetry being written by community-college students. The project included visits to various community colleges and a poetry contest on the campuses. For more information on Ryan's project, visit [www.loc.gov/poetry/mindsjoy/](http://www.loc.gov/poetry/mindsjoy/).

The Library of Congress' Poetry and Literature Center is the home of the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, a position that has existed since 1936, when Archer M. Huntington endowed the Chair of Poetry at the Library. Since then, many of the nation's most eminent poets have served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress and, after the passage of Public Law 99-194 (Dec. 20, 1985), as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. The Poet Laureate suggests authors to read in the literary series and plans other special events during the literary season.

Consultants in Poetry and Poets Laureate Consultants in Poetry and their terms of service are listed below.

- Joseph Auslander, 1937-1941
- Allen Tate, 1943-1944
- Robert Penn Warren, 1944-1945
- Louise Bogan, 1945-1946
- Karl Shapiro, 1946-1947
- Robert Lowell, 1947-1948
- Leonie Adams, 1948-1949
- Elizabeth Bishop, 1949-1950
- Conrad Aiken, 1950-1952, the first to serve two terms
- William Carlos Williams, appointed in 1952 but did not serve
- Randall Jarrell, 1956-1958
- Robert Frost, 1958-1959
- Richard Eberhart, 1959-1961
- Louis Untermeyer, 1961-1963
- Howard Nemerov, 1963-1964
- Reed Whittemore, 1964-1965
- Stephen Spender, 1965-1966
- James Dickey, 1966-1968
- William Jay Smith, 1968-1970
- William Stafford, 1970-1971
- Josephine Jacobsen, 1971-1973
- Daniel Hoffman, 1973-1974
- Stanley Kunitz, 1974-1976
- Robert Hayden, 1976-1978
- William Meredith, 1978-1980
- Maxine Kumin, 1981-1982
- Anthony Hecht, 1982-1984
- Robert Fitzgerald, 1984-1985
- Reed Whittemore, 1984-1985, Interim Consultant in Poetry
- Gwendolyn Brooks, 1985-1986
- Robert Penn Warren, 1986-1987, first to be Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry

- Richard Wilbur, 1987-1988
- Howard Nemerov, 1988-1990
- Mark Strand, 1990-1991
- Joseph Brodsky, 1991-1992
- Mona Van Duyn, 1992-1993
- Rita Dove, 1993-1995
- Robert Hass, 1995-1997
- Robert Pinsky, 1997-2000
- Stanley Kunitz, 2000-2001
- Billy Collins, 2001-2003
- Louise Glück, 2003-2004
- Ted Kooser, 2004-2006
- Donald Hall, 2006-2007
- Charles Simic, 2007-2008
- Kay Ryan, 2008-2010
- W.S. Merwin 2010-2011
- Philip Levine 2011-2012
- Natasha Trethewey 2012-2014
- Charles Wright 2014-2015

The Library of Congress, the nation's oldest federal cultural institution and the largest library in the world, holds more than 160 million items in various languages, disciplines and formats. The Library serves the U.S. Congress and the nation both on-site in its reading rooms on Capitol Hill and through its award-winning website at [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).

More information on the Poet Laureate and the Poetry and Literature Center can be found at [www.loc.gov/poetry/](http://www.loc.gov/poetry/).