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After the Beats: A New Generation Raises Its Voice in Poetry

By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO

Naomi Shihab Nye stood under the bright lights at Waterloo Village on Thursday night, a television camera hovering around her like a mobile X-ray, to read her work into a microphone. The poet could not hear herself; the wind whipping the tent's plastic walls, the rain's ping-ping drumbeat on the roof and the expanse of empty seats seemed to swallow the sound of her. I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,

or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,

but because it never forgot what it could do.

It was only the anticipation on the faces in the audience and the final applause that made Ms. Nye realize she had struck the right mix of words, gestures and pauses in performing her poetry, a talent that has become crucial to a poet's success. "It's an extremely important part of it," she admitted afterward.

Once the trademark of a Beat generation, poetry readings have moved out of smoky cafes and into libraries, bookstores and cafes (non-smoking, of course) around the country. With help from MTV's poetry videos and poetry slams at places like the Nuyorican Poets Cafe on East Third Street in the East Village, where audiences rate performances like Olympic judges, poetry readings -- as opposed to reading poetry -- are becoming a staple of the country's cultural scene.

"I'm much busier than I want to be, and I could be five times busier doing readings if I let myself," Ms. Nye said. In San Antonio, Tex., where she lives, "there are so many readings I can't even go to them all," she said.

The Poetry Calendar lists about 150 places in the New York area alone that hold poetry performances. At Elliott Bay Book Company in Seattle, Rick Simonson schedules 60 readings a year, some of them barely filling a row of seats, some drawing hundreds to the cavernous bookstore. In January, WNYC-FM and the 92d Street Y's Unterberg Poetry Center will produce "The Poet's Voice," a 13-week series of poetry readings that will be broadcast on public radio stations nationwide.

Thousands of poets -- some published, many more self-confessed "closet poets," many of them high-school teachers and their students -- gather here every other year for the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival: three days of readings, workshops and receptions with the likes of Adrienne Rich, Gary Snyder, Robert Bly, Robert Hass, David Mura and Daisy Zamora. The first night, as Ms. Nye read, about 500 devotees turned out in a driving rain, clustering near the stage in the 3,000-seat tent.

"The days of Emily Dickinson are over," said David Prather, 27, the editor of a small poetry review, who drove here from Parkersburg, W.Va., to hear the poets and search for new voices. "You can't just have your work stacked in a closet. If you don't get it out to the public, it's not doing anything."

Wilma Acree, a junior-high teacher who is a friend of Mr. Prather, said she thought meeting the authors whose work she taught would make them "more real." The two created a performance poetry group in their area that managed four bookings its first month, a sure sign that West Virginians had an appetite for the spoken word, Mr. Prather said.

Katherine Koch, a pre-school teacher who calls herself a "private poet," said she started attending poetry readings elsewhere after her daughter came here as a high school student. Ms. Koch said she traveled around the country on vacation this summer and found that the creative atmosphere she knew growing up in Greenwich Village in the 60's had spread. "It's regional now," she said. "Everywhere I went, even in small towns, I found bulletin boards with signs for poetry readings."

Silva Raker, vice president of merchandise operations for the Nature Company, flew in from Berkeley, Calif., for the festival after a friend described it as "the Woodstock of poetry." Her interest in poetry grew after a friend in California recited Robert Frost's "Canis Major" as they watched Orion in the sky one night. It coincided with a kind of psychological rebirth for her.

"I became single, and the world opened up again," she said over a soda in the last hours of the festival. "Now there's this whole cult where I work doing poetry. We'll stop in each other's offices and recite poetry right in the middle of the business day."

Some simply want to hear the sound of their poetry out loud. Paul-Victor Winters, who describes himself as a "shy guy" of 22, recited a rich, lyrical poem of family relations, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the lawn before him at the festival was empty on Thursday afternoon. "It's best when there's nobody in front of the microphone," he said, glancing across the gazebo at the downpour. "It's been empty for half an hour."

Others go hankering for discovery, noted Jonathan Galassi, the editor in chief of Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, who, speaking from his office, called the explosion in poetry performances "a kind of karaoke of the written word."

E. Ethelbert Miller, whose recently published anthology, "In Search of Color Everywhere," packed the Rizzoli store in SoHo when some of its contributing authors read there last week, agreed. "It's sometimes a matter of people getting access to publishing houses, and poetry slams have really helped with that," he said.

Poets, editors and publishers trace the interest in performance poetry to rap music and music videos. Indeed, some of the new poetry being performed seems to ignore the elusive borders between literature and music, between entertainment and art -- a distinction that makes more conventional poets bristle.

The most enthusiastic reception at the festival's first night was reserved for Sekou Sundiata, whose work appeared first in record stores and has just been published in "Aloud," an anthology of poetry from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. Mr. Sundiata's poetry features slices of city life chanted between extended musical interludes.

"That's not poetry," one author said as Mr. Sundiata chanted the refrain "Ain't it funky," over and over. "How would that look on the printed page? You couldn't do it." The observing poet appeared even more dismayed later when Mr. Sundiata faced a standing ovation.

The writer Marilyn Chin described public readings as "the only way to get our poetry out to the world" and said they had altered her poetry since 1987, when "Dwarf Bamboo" was published.

"My first book was quieter," she said. "I didn't think of the voice. Now, I write for the voice."

Oddly, however, the enthusiasm for poetry performed is generally not translating into increased book sales, publishers say. "As an art form, poetry's in good condition, but as a commercial enterprise it's always been nyeh," said Mr. Galassi of Farrar, Straus. "Some people say there are two million poets, but not as many readers."