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Cullowhee's Byer honored with Order of Long Leaf Pine

By Lynn Hotaling

After almost five years as North Carolina's poet laureate, Cullowhee's Kay Byer has received the state's highest civilian honor, joining such luminaries as Michael Jordan, Charles Kuralt, Maya Angelou, the Rev. Billy Graham, William Friday, Doug Marlette and Fred Chappell as a recipient of the Order of the Long Leaf Pine.

Byer's was awarded by N.C. Department of Cultural Resources Secretary Linda Carlisle during a recent ceremony in Raleigh recognizing the state's new poet laureate, Cathy Smith-Bowers of Tryon.

While her term as poet laureate is now over, Byer isn't slowing down just yet. She's organized a "Laureate's Choice" reading as part of Western Carolina University's upcoming Spring Literary Festival, she'll be part of a literature-themed week at the N.C. Center for the Advancement of Teaching, and she'll be honored as outgoing state poet laureate during a Thursday, March 25, Literary Festival reception.

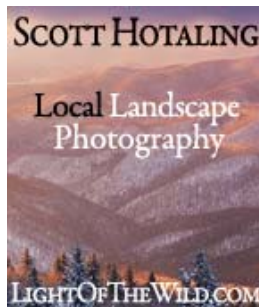


Outgoing North Carolina Poet Laureate Kay Byer of Cullowhee, left, recently received the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, the state's highest civilian award, from N.C. Department of Cultural Resources Secretary Linda Carlisle, center. With them is the new poet laureate, Cathy Smith-Bowers of Tryon.

Now in its seventh year, the WCU festival that celebrates literature and writers holds a special meaning for Byer. The event is an outgrowth of the Visiting Writers' Series Byer organized during her years at WCU. That series has now been concentrated into a weeklong festival directed by Mary Adams, and Byer was instrumental in bringing Chitra Divakaruni to this year's event. A prolific and multifaceted writer, Divakaruni's latest novel, "One Amazing Thing," is the story of nine people trapped by an earthquake. Her other works include books of poetry, a collection of short stories, the retelling of an ancient Indian epic and a children's novel. Divakaruni will participate in the NCCAT seminar with Byer.

Poets to be featured during Byer's Monday, March 22, "Laureate's Choice" panel are Carol Boston-Weatherford of Fayetteville, John Amen of Greensboro and Susan Davis of Raleigh.

According to Adams, Rob Neufeld of the Asheville Citizen-Times first had the idea to honor outgoing Poet Laureate Byer during this reception.



"Kay has done wonderful things for this reception and this region," Adams said.

Members of the community who are friends and admirers of Byer's who would like to attend the reception may call 227-3268 or e-mail Sherri Roper at slroper@email.wcu.edu by Monday, March 22. (Since wine will be served, reception attendance is limited to those 21 and older.)

Now that her years as poet laureate are over, Byer said she'll once again begin concentrating on her own writing. Her first short story, titled "Hook and Eye," will debut in the N.C. Literary Review in May. Set at the turn of the 20th century, the story, like many of Byer's poems, features an Appalachian setting. While she also has about 50 pages done toward a novel, Byer said she's not sure if it will ever be finished or published.

As laureate, Byer spent much of her time in Tar Heel State schools, especially in kindergarten through fourth-grade classrooms.

"I really enjoyed the kids and how lively and funny they are," she said. "I'd wear my cowboy boots and get them to help me finish poems."

Doing programs in elementary schools was a little scary at first, because she wasn't used to so many children at one time, but she grew comfortable with it, she said. During the term of Chappell, who preceded Byer as poet laureate, visiting schools became a focus for the state poet.

"The Arts Council wanted the poet laureate to be a presence in the state's reading and writing community to encourage literacy and the love of language," Byer said.

Toward that end, Byer began a monthly column, "Language Matters," that was published in The Herald and some 20 other newspapers across the state. In addition, she wrote occasional poems for special events, and found that she liked that as well.

"If I was asked, I did it," she said. "I discovered I could do it. I'd lived long enough, and I realized I could inspire myself by drawing on things I loved. I've been writing about quilts for years, and in one poem I was able to connect quilt imagery to whatever I was supposed to be writing about."

Byer describes herself as a narrative poet, and says Smith-Bowers, whose poems have been described as "miniature short stories," brings a similar approach.

"It would be nice if Together We Read (a regional effort to get people across Western North Carolina reading and discussing the same book) would select a poetry book," Byer said. "Then people would realize that poetry can be an enjoyable experience that doesn't require analyzing."

Byer cited Poetry Out Loud, a nationwide competition that requires high school students to memorize and recite poetry, is trying to address that issue. During her years as laureate, Byer was involved in that effort.

"My only quarrel with Poetry Out Loud is that its online anthology that kids choose from has very little Southern poetry," she said. "I thought they should have had some by Fred Chappell. That would give mountain children something to relate to and feel like their experience matters."

After her years of visiting schools, Byer said she thinks the current emphasis on testing combined with the financial downturn is taking a toll on creative writing and the arts in general.

"Teachers need support and encouragement to do that," Byer said. "I thought part of my job as laureate was to encourage that, and I had a little success."

As another form of encouraging poetry writing by North Carolina students, Byer's family endowed the Student Laureate Award for middle and high school students through the N.C. English Teachers Association. That award is set up so that whoever is the state's current poet laureate will select the winners.

"An important role the poet laureate can play is to encourage an interest in writing," Byer said.

While Byer enjoyed her time as poet laureate, five years was enough, she said.

"I'm glad I did it, but it's time for another writer to bring new ideas," she said.

A graduate of Wesleyan College in Macon, Ga., Byer received a master's in fine arts from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She was named by Gov. Mike Easley to be the state's poet laureate in February 2005.

Her books of poetry include "Coming to Rest," "Catching Light," "Black Shawl" and "Wildwood Flower." Her poems have appeared in several poetry journals and magazines and numerous anthologies. Byer was awarded the 2007 Hanes Award for Poetry by the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

She won the Lamont Poetry Selection for "Wildwood Flower," The Roanoke-Chowan and Brockman Campbell prizes for "Black Shawl," and the Southern Independent Booksellers Association Award for "Catching Light."

The FSW citation termed "Coming to Rest," Byer's most recent collection, "a re-articulation and a culmination of her distinguished career, which includes her position as North Carolina's poet laureate."

Byer received the North Carolina Award in literature in 2001, and her citation indicated she was chosen because of her "celebration of this state's human spirit through her poetry."

A lifelong resident of the rural South, Byer writes "poems that are stirring and haunting, particularly when she gives voice to the women of Appalachia," according to her 2001 citation. Born and raised in south Georgia, she has lived most of her adult life in Cullowhee.

Byer has served as poet-in-residence at both Western Carolina University and Lenoir-Rhyne College. She is also a former poetry instructor in the Master's of Fine Arts Program at UNC-G and has served on the boards for the N.C. Writer's Network, Writer's Workshop and The Arts Journal.

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