

Somerville News

[Margaret Young: A poet who uses all the trappings of the world as material](#)

On September 7, 2011, in [Latest News](#), by The News Staff



Poet Margaret Young uses costumes, food, old pop songs, as well as nature, and just about everything else on this world stage for material for her writing. Nothing is too insignificant or marginal: she gives a voice to it all. As her mentor the poet Gary Snyder taught her, poets should give voice to that cannot be voiced; this includes everything in the human world.

Young is a poet and a professor at Endicott College in Beverly, Mass. Her latest book of poetry is “Almond Town.” She earned an M.A. in Creative Writing from the University of California, Davis, and co-founded the Open Door Theatre Company. I talked with her on my Somerville Community Access TV show “Poet to Poet Writer to Writer.”

Doug Holder: You have an extensive background in theater. Does this inform your work?

Margaret Young: I kind of grew up with poetry everywhere. My father is a poet, editor; he is a theater teacher, and Shakespeare professor. We went to plays all the time and it was really when I started teaching theatre myself that I started to feel as though I was an artist. I was good at writing and other aspects of the theater. But something happened when I was doing children’s plays. I was working with little kids that didn’t have a lot of stuff in their lives. It was sort of out of the comfort zone for me. But I started to do it and it gave me all the belief in the power of art to change lives. In a way this is what I wasn’t able to achieve as a poet for many years. This maybe because there are not as many opportunities.

DH: Has your theater background helped you when you read from your work?

MY: When I first started reading I was at UC/DAVIS. We had a reading series. As things turned out I signed up to read last and I saw all my friends and colleagues read before me. And they would do what beginners do. They would get up and read their work, and they would sound a little scared. And it finally hit me—of course they were scared. Of course you don't have confidence, etc... So I learned to use my acting skills and pretended that I had all this confidence. And I got up there and everyone said "Wow!" I tell my students about this. As you know teaching is all about acting too.

DH: You got an M.A. in Creative Writing not an MFA. What is the difference?

MY: I wish someone told me about the difference. I know now it is considered a less complete degree. But this was the early 90's, there was an internet, but I didn't have access. I really didn't know anyone studying in these programs. So I got some brochures from three or four places. I didn't notice which one had the "F" and which one didn't have the "F." The program I chose might have had more an English emphasis than the MFA programs. We wrote a creative thesis. Each thesis had to be grounded in reading. I was taking classes with English students, which made for a richer experience for me.

DH: You have written about clothes and costumes. Do you feel the role of the poet is to strip away facades such as these and get to the meat of the matter?

MY: He or she can. But the poet can also pay close attention to what the clothes mean. We all pretend that they are meaningless and invisible. The essays I wrote about this subject took certain theatrical costumes that were associated with characters. One of the jobs of poetry is to look at the overlooked. Poetry should reexamine and refocus.

DH: You teach a course on Popular Culture at Endicott College in Beverly, Mass. Tell me about it.

MY: It is the trivia. It is the frivolous stuff. It is what surrounds us all the time. Examining this stuff is important in any undergraduate's education. Why are we surrounded and obsessed with all these trappings of pop culture?

DH: You seem to have affection for food in your writing.

MY: Yeah, I always figured why not study the stuff you consume every day. When I write about food I am writing about love, connection, and place.

DH: In the poem "Pastoral" in your new collection "Almond Town" you seem to imply that we separate ourselves from nature. Does poetry help you connect?

MY: To me one of the primary acts of poetry is to reconnect. So it always deepens my connection to it.

DH: Now... you lived the Boheme life and now you are a mother and wife. How has domesticity affected your creative life?

MY: I was very relieved when I had my first book -child before my first child-child. I felt I was ready. I had two books to mess around with while I was learning to be a mother. It would have been hard to balance them both earlier. It is a different life. But I also have new subject matter. For instance I can use the concept of 'play' and how that is aligned with the creative process.

DH: Your husband is a philosophy professor. Do you two complement each other in terms of each other's work?

MY: We read poetry together. And when we encounter art works together I like having that very different perspective. It is one that is logical. We think differently. I am glad that he spends his thought time in a different place. When we do come together we have great conversations. He is a better poet than I am a philosopher.

PERSISTENCE

Ivy, arugula even in this short solstice
light, foam packing peanuts the pale green
of glacier ice or sixties bridesmaids dresses.
Dead snake, little garter snake
died and slipped into Fox Way's icepack gutter
I'll enclose in a plastic bag and a time capsule
at the Andy Warhol museum New Year's party
with a really awful poem composed on the spot,
something about my blue dress and the millennium
and the dead snake in as the repressed spirit
of the watershed that will one day etc.
Dead snake now passed unnoticed by an old woman in a brown
leather coat and rhinestone-trimmed glasses
walking half a block ahead of me
stopping every fifteen steps or so
to look back at, what? my coat?
she might have worn thirty years ago
my sunglasses dimestore wannabes of hers
damp laundry clutched to my chest.

*** Published in Zingology.