



the beat goes on

By **Shana Ritter**
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(from left) Poets Tony Brewer, Cathy Bowman,
Anne Haines, Roger Mitchell, Patricia Coleman,
and Jenny Kander.



Poetry has been called a conversation,
and in Bloomington there's a lot of
talking going on. Listen to poetry at
a coffee house, participate in a writing
workshop, experience the dynamics of
a poetry slam, attend a spoken word
performance in a gallery, or marvel at
rare manuscripts in the Lilly Library—
there are countless opportunities to
partake of poetry in its many forms.

Bloomington's Poetry Scene

I write to survive and I survive to
write. I'm walking slow and drinking
lots of water.
Dennis Sipe
Pushcart prize nominee

Poetry has been enjoying a revival nationally—and in Bloomington—for more than 25 years. When Roger Mitchell, poet, professor, and former director of the Creative Writing Program at IU, came to town in 1976 there were only two poetry groups and one open mic in town. Ask local poets to describe the poetry scene in Bloomington today and the responses are “vibrant,” “varied,” even “luscious.”

The act of writing is most often solitary, but when poetry merges the intimate, internal voice of the individual writer with the perspective of the reader, a unique experience results. As poet Cathy Bowman explains, “Poetry is not a passive activity, not for the writer and not for the reader, it takes active engagement on both parts.”

That engagement takes place in an energetic mix of writing groups, workshops, readings, locally produced radio shows, and venues for spoken word and slams. Spoken word, or performance poetry, comes alive in front of an audience through rhythm, intonation, music, or movement. Poetry slams take performance poetry into the competitive arena by involving the audience in judging. Listening to poetry in the intimate confines of a coffeehouse like Runcible Spoon is almost like being in someone’s living room and a much different experience from hearing poetry read in a formal lecture hall or auditorium.

Poetry groups and workshops abound in Bloomington and offer critique, support, and community. From the mid-80s to the mid-90s Source: Women Writers met weekly, performed regularly, and offered workshops. Five Women Poets recently celebrated its 30th anniversary, and the Free Verse Poets have been meeting and giving annual readings for more than ten years. Most recently two other writing groups, the Women’s Writing Center and Women Writing for a Change, have offered workshops and readings. The John Waldron Arts Center has hosted readings and performances and continues to offer classes and workshops. The reading series at the Runcible Spoon has continued for more than 20 years. Radio shows on WFHB and WFIU offer regular poetry readings. And Matrix, a consortium of artists and poets, has gained national recognition for spoken word and slams held at various venues including bookstores and galleries.

As poet Anne Haines says, “Being in a place where there’s access and exposure is really important. I love going to readings by local folks, as well as by nationally known writers. Bloomington is very conducive to writing and creating.”

It would be impossible to feature all the poets in Bloomington. The six profiled here are recognized not only for their individual poetic voices but also for their work in bringing the voices of poets together. Each in his or her own way contributes to the growing vibrancy of the Bloomington poetry scene.



Jenny Kander

Jenny Kander is known to many as the “poetry lady,” a title she says she adores. She came to Bloomington in 1992 from South Africa to live near her daughter, Tamar Kander, a painter. When she moved here, she promised herself poetry classes— something she’d never had the time for when she worked as a grief counselor.

But she did much more. She went to the community radio station WFHB with an idea for a daily dose of poetry, *The Linen of Words*, and for years Bloomington heard her voice or her guests’ voices twice a day. She still has a weekly show, *The Poet’s Weave*, on WFIU, which can be heard on Sunday morning or as a podcast.

“Poetry speaks to all of us of the human condition,” Kander says. “What I most want people to know is not to be afraid of it. It’s fear talking when people say, ‘I don’t read poetry; it’s not for me.’”

Kander’s poems explore relationships and the surprises of the everyday. She published her first book of poetry, *Taboo*, in which she explores family, in 2004. She wrote the book over a period of years, bringing poems to her ongoing writer’s workshop, The Free Verse Poets. “The poems kept knocking at my door,” she says. “The biggest challenge in writing poetry is cutting back to essence. I’ve written bad poetry all my life, but the good poetry is up and down.”

In 2002, Kander edited *The Linen Weave of Bloomington Poets*, published by Wind Press. It features 50 Bloomington poets from the town and the university, many of whom had appeared on Kander’s radio shows over the years. The book, she says, was her way of saying thank you to Bloomington for surrounding her with poetry.

Poetry is both a game, finding the right words, the right form, and a release. For writing allows me to express thoughts and emotions that I would find impossible to say any other way.
Leah Helen May
gardener

BIDDEN

*An urge to write has been
distracting me for hours but I’ve
no theme. Like a kettle about to boil,
the impulse intensifies. Where to begin?
Collaged images respond with a ruby
merlot, Minoans leaping over bulls at Knossos,
waving strands of viridian yarn and a young
Plath, smiling in Hughes’ embrace.*

*Freckled cowries for bartering, the slap-flat
snouts of pigs and bubbles from a bluehead wrasse
all woven on words’ wide loom: a textured
wrap to gift a friend in her mid-life tension,
an assemblage to surprise, to veer her
from torn nails, simmering angst.*

—Jenny Kander



Cathy Bowman

Over coffee at the Runcible Spoon, Cathy Bowman shares some of her ideas on bridging the divide between town and gown. Bowman is the Ruth Lilly Professor of Poetry, director of the Creative Writing Program at

IU, and author of such poetry collections as *Notarikon*, *Rock Farm*, and *1-800-HOT-RIBS*. She gave poetry a national voice when she hosted *Poetry Showcase* on NPR's *All Things Considered*.

Bowman has taken an active role in connecting the university with the community. This past year she worked with PQ Phan, a composer at the IU School of Music, to create a workshop that combined poetry and music. Poets created pieces that were then set to music and performed. The MFA reading series, which brings nationally known poets to Bloomington, was held in town instead of on campus, and next year Bowman is planning a poets and puppets theater workshop. Her Friday afternoon program on community radio offers another opportunity to engage with a wider audience, "a place for the particular, the private, and the public to interact," she says.

Bowman grew up in El Paso, Texas, and studied poetry in graduate school at Columbia University. She taught at Manhattan College and Bennington before coming to Bloomington about ten years ago. Living here, she says, has brought more "breathing space" into her work, resulting in a looser style of writing. Another influence on her writing has been access to resources such as the Sylvia Plath collection at the Lilly Library. She was able to study not only Plath's manuscripts but her diaries, her passports, her paper dolls. From this, a new collection of poems entitled *The Plath Cabinet* is forthcoming.

One way to view writing poetry, Bowman says, could be called "a junkyard approach. I love the discovery of putting words and phrases together. Language has a physicality that makes my mouth water." But writing is not always easy, she acknowledges. "Sometimes it's a gift, and sometimes it's a long, hard process. The hardest part about writing can be getting out of the way."

NAMES OF TULIPS, GOOD FRIDAY

The All Winter I've Waited.
The Then You Came Backs.
Wands. Wounds. Tarot Cups. Lisps.
Strapless Dresses. Sylvia Tears.
Conjugations. Anne Frank's Looms.
Another Man Done Gones.
Kleenex After Sex. Mrs. Manner's Accidents.
The How Funerals.
The Greedy Toos.
Freaks. The What Happens Every Afternoons.
The Purple Spot on My Neck.
The Eye Tricks. Children's Bibles.
The Favorite Parts of His Body.
His Forty Last Words

—Catherine Bowman

Tony Brewer

Bringing the university and the town together was what gave Matrix its start in 1998. Tony Brewer and John Pearson created Matrix as a project to fulfill a degree requirement for Pearson, who left Bloomington in 2000. Brewer then teamed up with poet Joe Kershbaum and they have been directing Matrix ever since. Matrix offers a venue for their own work—both are poets and performers—as well as bringing many voices together at slams and spoken word events in a variety of venues including Boxcar

Books, Max's Place, Rhino's, and Soma. Matrix also puts out a yearly anthology and works with the Parks and Recreation Department to produce Youth Slams.

It was the voice of the Beats that drew Brewer into poetry and a fascination with creation myths that gave rise to his first performance piece in the mid-90s. Brewer works in production and design at IU Press and did radio theater for five years before concentrating on poetry and performance. He says that poetry "is a better representation of the way my brain works than prose."

According to Brewer there are two ways to be a professional poet. One is the route of the MFA program; the other is to keep on sending out your work until you find similar voices and build a network with people who also write and read.

HOW I FOUND MY VOICE

*I stopped looking
 in dumpsters and downspouts,
 donned duck boots, and waded
 upstream to the gush and glut
 where rain flood meets
 sewer grate— and when
 I tugged the branch that held
 the wrappers tight
 over the rusted iron gate,
 it all went schlup down the hole,
 the hell, the whole. All that trash
 damming up my crossing
 flew like a river to an ocean,
 and I lament its passing
 but have no regret
 as I set foot onto wet pavement
 as if for the first time,
 over the gutter and onward,
 not swept away but moving
 under my own, dry power.*

—Tony Brewer



*I write poetry
 because people,
 places, events
 speak to me.
 Antonia Matthew
 fiction writer*



Anne Haines

Anne Haines can be found behind a reference desk at the IU library as well as on the pages of many national poetry journals. She came to Bloomington from Ft. Wayne more than 25 years ago to study at IU and never left. Her writing explores the way things change, and Bloomington has influenced her work in a variety of ways. “The seasons and unpredictable weather...create

an environment of continual change in what seems like a stable place.” Another aspect of that change “is knowing and understanding the impermanence of connection” in a university town that is often seen as a temporary place to live.

Haines has been writing poetry since high school. At that age, the risk lay in expressing herself; now, she says, the risk is in exploring new forms, new ways of writing. She was the founder of Source: Women Writers. She continues writing as part of Five Women Poets, keeps an online blog, and regularly participates in workshops at the Fine Arts Center in Provincetown, MA. Her online writing community adds to the diversity of voices, languages, and poetry she finds here in Bloomington. “The stereotype is that poetry is read by people who write it,” she says, “but really the poetry scene offers a place for anyone to enjoy language, stories, and community.”

APART

*The dying-battery beep reminds me
that we can't talk like this forever.*

*It's the things we can't help—
the lock that freezes three times every winter,*

*clocks that spring
forward, dinner burnt, pages*

*drifting to the floor—
that keep us apart.*

*I'm always driving west at sunset:
gold slipping nearer the horizon,*

*the flare of blindness on my windshield,
everywhere I turn, so much unexpected light.*

—Anne Haines

*I write for posthumous fame—
though I wouldn't mind a
little pre-death notoriety.
Richard Cecil
English professor*

WHERE DO UNANSWERED QUESTIONS GO?

*Where do unanswered questions go?
Are they huddled and stuffed,
bagged up like used linens, strewn
carelessly into dark deep ordinary corners
of some elsewhere?*

*Or, are they out floating with a
folded edge thrust outward waiting
to hitch a ride with any passing searching
someone, freshly extending the inquiry
old or new, just to have the emptiness
of question complete?*

—Patricia Coleman

Patricia Coleman

Patricia Coleman sees writing poetry as daring: “It’s intimate, and sharing that intimacy is a brave thing to do.”

For the past three years she has been facilitating the Runcible Spoon Poetry Series, continuing the longstanding tradition of poetry at the Spoon. “I love the chemistry of bringing people together,” she says. “I never knew Bloomington had so many voices.” Her plan for the series: to bring even more voices into the mix, drawing from diverse communities—university and town, young and old.

A visual artist, peace activist, community organizer, and poet, Coleman came to Bloomington 25 years ago. She grew up in Washington, DC, and was drawn to writing in reaction to the Vietnam War. “As a kid I thought about other kids; I wanted to find a way to help create peace, and language offered that possibility.” The most important quality of her poetry is “honesty to whatever I am writing about.” Coleman says she seeks “to tell a meaningful story” in her poems and that “the language of poetry invites you to consider something more deeply.”

Coleman knew and worked with Etheridge Knight, the well-known poet and activist of the Black Arts Movement. Knight, Nikki Giovanni, and Rumi, the 13th century Persian poet, have influenced Coleman’s work, as has belonging to Five Women Poets for the past five years.





WHEN THEY DRAINED GRIFFEY
for Richard Hugo

*A thin stream slid through the drained lake,
the spine of a snake, curled in a long bowl
of dirt, the banks washed clean as a dune.
Where were the stumps, the stunned branches, the barn?
Where was the lank shack of the rain?
Along the edge, the stranded lilies groaned.*

*A can of rusty beer at the bottom popped.
The sweat of the boy who drowned that year
lay close to the lip. And a name like low fog
drifted over the tight mosses. I slid
down in on the cracked mud and raked
among the corpses, happy as a crab.*

*It was a slice of melon in the dark
down there, the moon turned inside out,
the earth undressed. When they pulled
the blanket of clear, gray water
up slowly over the naked valley,
light twitched as the fish leapt up.*

—Roger Mitchell

Roger Mitchell

Currently retired, Roger Mitchell directed IU's MFA program and the Writer's Conference and has published eight books of poetry. He has taught poetry in a wide variety of settings including

universities, public schools, and prisons. He spends part of the year in his native upstate New York and part in Bloomington. Mitchell has lived in southern Indiana for 30 years and speaks about the influence that place can have on writing, "not just because I write about the region directly from time to time, but because it has been here...that I have learned to be the particular person I am."

He earned a doctorate in literature but thought of it as training in writing. Mitchell writes in a wide range of poetic forms about the land, relationships, history, and stories. He says the great writers and critics of the past are extraordinary teachers but that there is much to learn from those who are writing now, "who are struggling with the same issues, personal, public, and writerly, as you are. This is what even the great critics of literature can't help you with. They are students of the past, of a literature which is more or less completed, if not yet completely understood. The writer lives now.... He or she is drawing maps for the wilderness of the present, maps that later writers, most especially critics, will tidy up and use to 'explain' the poet's or the novelist's rough charts. Some will be used by historians and philosophers to define an age." ✨

Poetry Resources

Matrix

A space for literary and visual arts
www.matrixmag.com

Resources for Writers and Runcible Spoon Poetry Series

<http://www.hartrock.net/writersartistsresource.htm>

Women Writing for a Change

A creative writing class and a growing community that supports women writers in search of voice.
www.bethlodge-rigal.com

Women's Writing Center

Education and outreach to women and girls who want to use writing as a tool for healing, social, and/or personal change.
www.bwwc.org

IU Creative Writing Program and Indiana University Writer's Conference

<http://www.indiana.edu/~mfawrite/>

IU Lilly Library

A depository for rare books and collections.
<http://www.indiana.edu/~liblilly/>

WFIU Poets Weave

Podcasts of locally produced poetry readings.
<http://www.podcastdirectory.com/podcasts/20569>

Blaise Cendrars said, answering
"Why Do I Write?" "Because ..."
This reason holds true for a child.
It works for me too.
Willis Barnstone
IU distinguished professor