



Our Interview with **Laurel Peterson**

Norwalk's First Poet Laureate



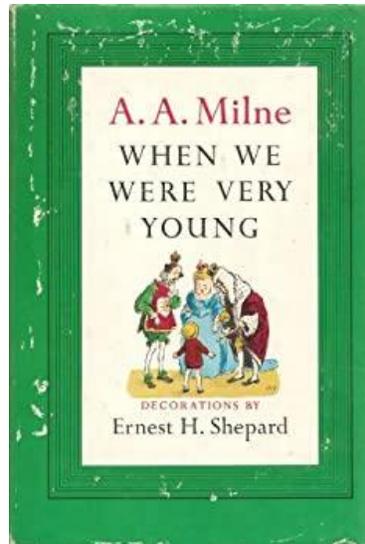


Sally from the Norwalk Public Library: Hi, Laurel! This interview is very special for me! I first met you when you became Norwalk's first poet laureate in 2016, but I know so little about your beginnings as poet. Please tell us how you came to poetry. Did you love poetry as a child?

Laurel: Hi Sally: It's an honor for me to be here. Thanks for all you're doing for poetry at the library, and for asking me to participate.

I loved all literature as a child. My mother was an elementary school teacher, and my father was a great reader, so there were always books in the house. I remember reading *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy together as a family in the evenings. In terms of poetry, I still have some of the children's poetry books that I loved, mostly big anthologies, but also A. A. Milne. I still use him in the classroom as a non-threatening place to start to learn about poetry's elements.





Sally: That's so great that your family read together as you were growing up, and that you still have your poetry books from childhood. Which poets were your earliest influences, or, shall I say, brought you to poetry? Why, and how?

Laurel: I wrote as a child, but for various reasons it went underground and didn't reemerge until college. (We all write poetry in college, right? It's such a dramatic time.) My college English professor wrote poetry, and encouraged my interest. In grad school, I fell in love with Anne Sexton, Mark Doty, Mark Strand, Rilke, Sekou Sundiata, T. S. Eliot, and so on! One of my professors, Dan Masterson, a wonderful poet himself, was also a great influence and source of support as I got serious about the work.



Sally: I know you are a professor at Norwalk Community College.
What courses do you teach?

Laurel: I teach Literature and Composition (a second semester writing course) and all the creative writing courses, from Introduction to Creative Writing to Poetry Workshop, Fiction Workshop, Mixed Genre Workshop (a course I developed in which students use multiple genres to tell a single story), Novel Writing I and II. As well, I teach the Honors version of Literature and Composition, and will be teaching an Honors version of Great Books next year, which should be fun. Finally, I teach an interdisciplinary course in the arts called The Creative Voice, which looks at the ways the creative process, the elements of form, and the critical eye link music, visual arts, dance, film and literature. Obviously, I don't teach them all every semester! But the variety keeps me on my toes.

Sally: Those sound like wonderful courses!

Did you always want to be a teacher? Please share with us your journey into teaching! Some of our greatest poets were also great teachers (Theodore Roethke comes to mind!).

Laurel: I like to tell my students, who are often conflicted or confused about who they are, that I didn't know what I wanted to be for a long time. I started college as a piano major, then changed to psychology, which I loved (and still do. People are endlessly fascinating!). After college, I worked in various businesses for about seven years—from an advertising agency to a tree company—but missed the life of the

mind. So I went back to school. I don't know where the intention to teach came from, other than it seemed a practical use of a masters degree. Fortunately, I love the classroom, and I miss that I won't be able to go back in the fall, except online, due to COVID.

Sally: Yes, I think it's important, too, for young people to keep in mind that it is natural to be uncertain about what you want to do with your life, and that it may take some time for you to decide. The important thing is to keep learning, and exploring.



The COVID situation is indeed challenging, I agree. I see how you will miss the classroom.

Can you share a memorable teaching experience with us?

Laurel: I don't know that any single experience stands out, as there have been so many wonderful students over the years. One of my great pleasures was being able to bring U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith to NCC, and have my students be introduced to her, and to see her speak.

Sally: That's so great that you really enjoy your students! I remember when you invited Tracy K. Smith to speak at NCC.

I know you also write fiction (mystery, I believe: *Shadow Notes*, being your published novel). I find that very admirable—to be able to write both poetry and fiction. How do you handle that? Do you find yourself naturally sort of falling one way (poetry), and then the other (fiction)? Is poetry more predominant with you, would you say?

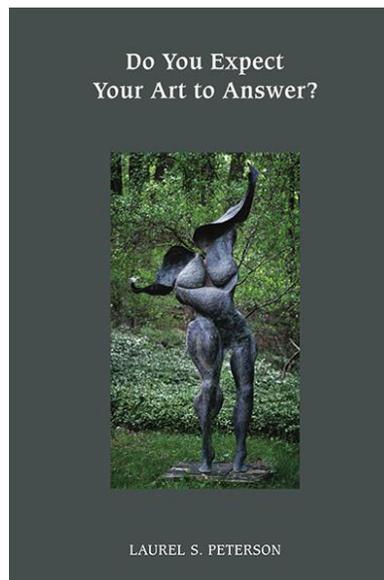
Laurel: I think I'm better at poetry than fiction, but I don't know if the world sees it that way! I can do cultural criticism with fiction that would seem polemic in poetry. My humor in poetry is really dark, so in fiction I have more room to be funny in lighter ways. I tend to work more intensively on fiction projects, and I find them easier to structure in terms of writing time. That is, it's easier to write or edit five pages of the novel than it is to start a poem. I don't think either genre dominates; it depends more on which form serves what I'm thinking about. For the past five years or so, I've found it easier to write poetry if I have a collection in mind. It focuses my mind on a topic, and then I start to see connections everywhere.



Sally: Please tell us about your poetry collections: *Do You Expect Your Art to Answer?*, and *That's the Way the Music Sounds*. Could you share with us your journeys with these books—from their beginnings through their publications? I am always interested in how

a book begins forming for a poet, and when it feels ready to, indeed, be considered a finished book. It's so interesting.

Laurel: *That's the Way the Music Sounds* was my first collection. It and my second collection, *Talking to the Mirror*, are early poems where I'm still finding my voice. They are both broadly about coming into a sense of self, especially in relationship and as a writer. *Do You Expect Your Art to Answer?* began as a project to write ekphrastic poems.



My husband and I love art museums, and have memberships at the Whitney and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Many art works over the years have had a powerful impact on me. For example, *Whistler's Symphony in White #1*, also known as *The White Girl*, is filled with incredible symbolism. She's standing on a wolf pelt, holding a white lily, dressed totally in white, with that red hair. How could I not go from that image to Little Red Riding Hood, and from there to

issues of women's innocence versus their sexual power? It's all in the painting! I loved the idea of thinking about all that in poems.



Whistler's Symphony in White #1

Sally: That's such a beautiful painting. I can see how you were drawn to it, how it evoked Little Red Riding Hood for you, and completely ignited your imagination. I love, too, that Whistler uses the word "Symphony" in his title for it. Indeed, the painting holds sound, music, and is grand.

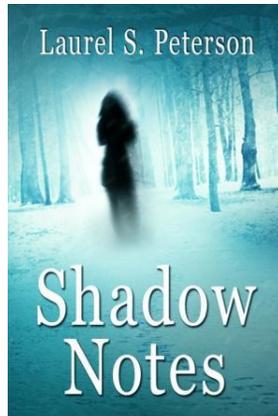
Do you have a new book in the works?

Laurel: I have two finished collections that are looking for publishers. The first, *The Charlene Poems*, is a collection of persona poems about the shapes that women's lives take. Charlene has attitude, so they were a lot of fun to write. (And I'm not sure she's done talking yet!!)

The second collection, *Daughter of Sky*, comes from my growing up as the daughter of an airline pilot. We traveled a lot when I was younger, and I am seriously infected with the travel bug. I am also fascinated with the many discoveries happening in astrophysics and space exploration. I don't have the mathematical knowledge to truly understand the reasons for the discoveries, but the metaphorical implications of black holes, the ever expanding universe, the possibility of multiverses, and the relation of all that to human beings' conceptions of God or spirit interests me. The book is an attempt to explore those ideas.

While it's not poetry, I'm also delighted that Chris Madden, an excellent Norwalk poet and one of the founding partners of Woodhall Press, is going to be re-releasing my first mystery, *Shadow Notes*, and bringing out my second mystery, *The Fallen*, later this year or in early 2021.





Sally: Congratulations! Chris Madden is also a great friend of the Norwalk Public Library. He was in my MFA Graduating Class from Fairfield University, too (small world). My next Poetry Page is going to feature him. You are in good hands with [Woodhall Press](#)! I see you also have four poems in [Peacock Journal, 2017](#). Such a gorgeous magazine. I encourage our audience here to take a look!

Could you let us in a little on your writing process? Do you revise your work heavily, would you say, or do poems arrive pretty much intact?

Laurel: It depends on the poem. Some take me years to write because I'm figuring out what the important idea or feeling is at the poem's core. Some arrive more formed. I always, always revise. I have a wonderful writing group, and a husband who is a poet and an excellent critic. I rely on them to see what I miss, and I always miss something!

Sally: I have often heard poets say—and, indeed, I feel I might feel this way—that the role of laureateship conflicts with the private role of creating poetry. Of course, not all poets feel this way! How was it for

you, balancing the public role of laureate with the more private role of poet?

Laurel: Those three years were incredibly productive for me. The two books I mention above were mostly written during that time, as was the second mystery novel. I'm not sure I could do it again—I was really tired when I was done!—but being surrounded by other creative people in an environment that was so supportive (kudos to Susan Wallerstein and Chris Bradley) helped make me creative as well. That's one of the things I miss. All the cross-pollination with musicians Neddy Smith and Jim Clark, dancer Steph Kunkel, artist Lynn Massey-Stephens, as well as the requests for particular kinds of events, inspired interesting projects and ideas.

Sally: Yes, you've done so much for the Norwalk Community in your three years as laureate, Laurel. I love how you've paired poetry with other arts (music, dance, visual art).

What would you name your greatest accomplishment as laureate? What are you most proud of? Is there something you might have done differently?

Laurel: I'm most proud that many different artistic communities participated in our events (including creating them) as well as a church, a social service agency, and the environmental group at Oak Hills Park. I reached out to the schools, but was unable to engage them, and that was a loss. I particularly would have liked to find a way to engage more with communities of color.

Sally: Thanks so much, Laurel, for talking with us today!

I remember when I told a friend of mine that “Laurel Peterson was our poet laureate.” She responded, “Is her name really *Laurel*?” (I hadn’t caught that at first!) That is so lovely, isn’t? Almost in naming you, your parents knew you’d be a poet.



Laurel in Front of a Museum

Now, a selection of Laurel’s poems...



PRAYER

At the edge of the universe,
expanding beyond our mathematical schemes—
white scribbles on chalkboard,
scrolling black numerals on white screens—
beyond the interior universe of the baby,
what's happening behind her eyes as she,
silent old soul in new skin, tracks you like a satellite;
beyond the disappearance of fathers and mothers
into black absences, still burning hot;
beyond all that light hasn't yet reached
because it's not fast enough or the bulb blew out—
there is where our desperate prayers might slip
through the cracks and reach god.

Laurel Peterson

Published in [Verse-Virtual, An Online Community Journal of Poetry](#)

HEAVEN

In six billion years,
babies wrapped in yellow blankets,
new bean shoots and crocus tips poking through mud,
a sudden spew of newborn seahorses—
all gone, exploded by the sun's nuclear furnace.

But

after the blast,

My God,

we are reborn.

Always stardust,

we bloom as fluorescing nebulae.

Glorious glowing garnet, cobalt, jade

across the universe:

light reformed.

Beauty: I will reawaken as beauty.

I need no other God.

Laurel Peterson

Published in Verse-Virtual, An Online Community Journal of Poetry

ARABS IN ICELAND

Last night, after too many glasses of wine,
Charlene decided the Middle East
should move north
to cool off.

Iceland and Greenland didn't
have civil wars, she thought:
they were all too busy trying to keep warm.

It might also be a mark of her ignorance:
Maybe northerners fought over the best seat
in the thermal springs, or whether or not
the elves said *yes* to the new road.
Conflict, perhaps, was inevitable.

Maybe living somewhere hot exaggerated the pain.
Or maybe it was the sand in your sandals,
the dry in your throat, the grit in your underwear,
the flies' little feet across your lips
dowsing for moisture.

Three months of dark might create fewer bombings
but more suicides.
Maybe everyone would huddle by their fires,
rather than setting them in the marketplace.
Maybe, humbled by the northern lights,
the only color on those long winter cycles
when one cannot even call day by its own name,
maybe then, they would want only
to mimic its magnificence.

Charlene didn't know.
She poured another glass of wine,
wished she could stop shivering.

Laurel Peterson

