THE ROLE OF THE POET LAUREATE

ABSTRACT

Glen Sorestad first begins by reflecting on his role as the poet Laureate of Saskatchewan. He then graces our pages with his delightful poetry.

GLEN SORESTAD
Glen Sorestad is Poet Laureate of Saskatchewan.

I was appointed to my role as Poet Laureate of Saskatchewan at the end of November in 2000 for a two-year term, and was subsequently reappointed for a second two-year term. So I am now close to having completed three years and during this time my role has evolved and altered gradually, but is essentially one that makes me a kind of itinerant, provincial advocate for poetry, writing, and by extension all of the arts and cultural community in the province. *Though I am a poet first and foremost,* and though I read poems (both mine and others') and talk about poetry with students or general audiences, I also bring along as part of my message to whatever communities I am invited into that the arts play an important role in the life of our province; furthermore Saskatchewan has produced some of Canada's finest artists in every sphere of the arts, and especially so in the literary arts. In this sense then, part of my role, with which I happen to approve, is that of a spokesperson and advocate for the arts trying to educate, remind and instill pride in the general public regarding Saskatchewan's highly talented arts scene. It's not hard to express enthusiasm about a writing community that has produced such well known Canadian writers as Guy Vanderhaeghe and Sharon Butala, Anne Szumigalski and Lorna Crozier, Arthur Slade and Lois Simmie, to name just a few.

From the outset it was decided that as Poet Laureate I would be open to invitations from communities throughout the province, large and small, to come to any community for some special occasion that did not necessarily have to be literary because we felt that the program should not just become a one-person reading program. The actual program for Poet Laureate visits is administered by the Saskatchewan Writers Guild. We have stressed in promoting the program that it would be appropriate to invite the Poet Laureate to share in and participate in community celebrations that could be of a cultural, historical or educational nature. So I have spoken at service club anniversaries, high school awards nights, fund-raisers for local museums, school writing competitions, library celebrations, National Poetry month and Canada Book Day events, readings in the Legislature, a fly-in visit to the northernmost schools in Saskatchewan, as well as many others.

I personally try to encourage my participation in events that will encompass other arts, cross-over occasions, such as I collaborated on with the visual artist-in-residence at the Ursuline Campus of the University of Saskatchewan in the little community of Bruno. We jointly presented to several groups of high school students sessions that explored the relationship between poetry and visual art.

Also considered important functions within the Poet Laureate's role have been formal occasions such as a state dinner with Prince Charles at Government House in Regina, a similar state occasion with Governor General Clarkson and her consort, the annual gala Saskatchewan Book Awards dinner at which the Poet

Laureate always has a role to play, the annual Festival of Words in Moose Jaw where the Poet Laureate often introduces Saskatchewan poets at their sessions, receptions with members of the Canada Council for the Arts and the annual Culture reception for MLAs to meet with members of the Saskatchewan arts and cultural community of the province.

My personal touch to the role is to try to involve myself with young writers wherever I go and to encourage the writing and reading of poetry. I have, over the three years, been in touch with quite a number of young poets in many communities and one occasion actually arranged for four young poets to share a reading with me in the Saskatoon Public Library as a National Poetry month event.

These are ways in which the Poet Laureate's role has evolved in Saskatchewan. The next Poet Laureate will, I hope and anticipate, further the development of this role and take it into new areas.

On the Anniversary of 9/11 the Poet has his Pocket Picked

A year to the very day
after the world discovered
airliners could vanish
into towers of concrete and steel
and a nation learned how
vulnerable freedom can be
at the hands of unseen foes

a woman's hand
stole into my pocket as I
boarded a crowded subway train
in Milano and I learned how
vulnerable are those who
trust too easily.

But I whirled, seized
the thief's hand as it slid
beneath the coat over her arm
and my wallet fell at her feet
as she yanked free
and fled the train.

Skyscrapers will be rebuilt
and airliners replaced,
the dead mourned.
Freedom may yet prevail.
Those who trust too much
will be victims, again and again.