

FAVORITE

POEM

PROJECT

NEWSLETTER / JAN 2021

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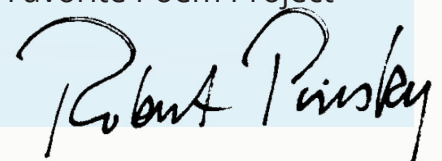
A Note from Robert Pinsky

The Favorite Poem Project demonstrates that poetry is a fundamental art, with an appeal as ancient and basic as dancing and cuisine. The anthologies from Norton and the videos at www.favoritepoem.org continue as useful, encouraging examples for teachers in particular and readers in general.

Other principles of the FPP have been to include poetry in languages other than English and readers with many different kinds of education. All of that and more is reaffirmed by a beautiful reading and appreciation of Arthur Rimbaud's "Le Dormeur du Val", in our most recent video. It is there in the top row on the FPP web site. The reader, chef Jacques Pépin, reads the poem in French and in an English translation by Wallace Fowlie. M. Pépin mentions that he dropped out of school when he was quite young.

Our new Director, Annette Frost, was there to oversee the video shoot. Annette asked the questions that led to cogent, insightful words about the poem, including the subject of war as it relates to young people. M. Pépin was young, he recalls, during the Nazi occupation of France. Annette also asked the reader what dish he might compare to the qualities he admires in Rimbaud's poem.

The FPP continues to thrive and grow, with our quite limited resources. The web presence will be greatly improved. Annette's work on that project, and the new video work, is based on groundwork by her predecessor Laura Marris. My personal thanks to them, and to all who read this, in our Favorite Poem Project community.



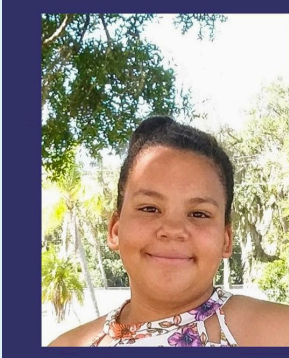
Upcoming events

Student, Faculty & Alumni FPP Reading

We will be hosting an online version of our Student, Faculty & Alumni FPP reading **Friday, January 15 at 6:30pm**. The theme for this reading will be "renewal" as we head into this new year. If you would like to read a poem, please email fpp@bu.edu **no later than January 11th** with your selected poem and a little bit about why you chose it.

Robert Lowell Memorial Lecture Series

We are excited to announce that award-winning poet Peter Balakian will be "coming" to BU to read alongside BU alumna Susan Barba for our spring **RLML Thursday, February 18 at 7:00pm**. We hope you will join us (from anywhere!) for this Zoom Webinar. More information on our Instagram and Facebook accounts [@favepoem](https://www.instagram.com/favepoem).



My name is Maddison Smith. I am 12 and in the 6th grade at Booker Middle School in Sarasota, Florida. I study creative writing and sing soprano in the choir. I enjoy spending time with family and friends. I attend church at Rogers Community United Methodist Church in Bradenton, Florida.

#Restoration Campaign

This spring and summer we ran our FPP [#restoration](#) campaign on Facebook and Instagram to highlight favorite poems all over the country during this time of deep uncertainty. We asked people to send in the poems they were leaning on more than ever during quarantine, and we were blown away by the enthusiastic response we received. You can see the nearly 100 entries on our Instagram page [@favepoem](#). Maddison chose "Dreams" by Langston Hughes.



Featured FPP Video

We are excited to announce a brand-new Favorite Poem Project video featuring renowned chef Jacques Pépin reading "Le Dormeur du Val" by Arthur Rimbaud. This video was produced in collaboration with BU Today. Please visit our website favoritepoem.org to explore this and our full collection of videos.



Favorite Poem Project 2020 Recap

2020 was a wild ride. We are grateful for all the good work we've accomplished and the wonderful people we have had the honor of working with. We had a wonderful Student and Faculty FPP reading in February, and in November we were joined by the extraordinary poets Natasha Trethewey and Megan Fernandes for our first virtual Robert Lowell Memorial Lecture series. We have expanded our social media presence and hope you'll follow us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter if you don't already.

Poetry Constellation Project to Launch in 2021

We are excited to announce the 2021 launch of our newest website feature: The Robert Pinsky Poetry Constellation. This two-page addition to our website will host every poetry resource Robert Pinsky has created and accumulated in his lifetime. The resources include Favorite Poem Project videos, PBS NewsHour clips, Slate articles, and many more. In addition to navigating these resources via a dropdown menu, you will also be able to use our visualization tool to hover over and explore different poets and their connected resources. We hope to be launching this new website as early as Spring 2021. Stay tuned!

Send Us Your News!

Do you have a poetry-related event or opportunity you'd like to share with our audience? Contact fpp@bu.edu with the details. We would love to hear from you!

Interview with an Educator

Maggie Dietz, founding director of the Favorite Poem Project and Associate Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Lowell

Favorite Poem Project: You were the director of the Favorite Poem Project when Robert Pinsky first conceived of the project; what drew you to the work and how does it feel to see the project still up and running more than 20 years later?

Maggie Dietz: I more or less fell into working for the project after having been Robert's student in the graduate creative writing program at BU. I didn't know in the early days that it would be such hard work—trying to run a national project on a shoestring budget with a tiny staff of mostly undergrads. And I didn't know it would be one of the great joys of my life. The project in its simplicity—asking readers, ordinary Americans, to choose a favorite poem and say a little about why they love it—taught me a lot about the art of poetry, not only because I discovered new poems and poets, but because I saw where and how poetry really lives. It was a hopeful endeavor, and I'm thrilled it still has a life and an audience after all these years.

FPP: Poets and writers often have a variety of other professions; what made you want to teach, and what have you learned about teaching over the years?

MD: I'm a school person, always have been. When I was growing up I loved snug leather shoes in early September and a new backpack sturdy enough to hold more and bigger books. I loved pencils, notebooks, Bunsen burners, chalk, rows of lockers, and shiny asbestos tiles. Later, in college and grad school, I loved the feeling of fall on campus, shorter days and reddening maples, seminar classrooms with creaky wooden desks, long nights at the library. I'm a sucker for all that stuff. I guess it was inevitable that I'd become a teacher.

I've had many extraordinary teachers, and I hope my teaching reflects their best practices. I used to try to control what happened in the classroom more. Now I embrace unpredictability. I try to stay out of the way enough for students to point out things I might have. I try to steer the ship from the crew's nest.

Because I teach mostly creative writing classes, I have to remind myself how hard workshop can be for students, and how much they anticipate and have anxiety about it. Really, a person forgets after a while because over time the artistic process—at least mine—relies less and less on other people's input. I needed workshop when I was young and I love to participate in it with my students now; at its best, with the right group, it is a kind of collective mentorship. Feedback is a gift, and in class I try to encourage it to be offered—be it positive or less so—in that spirit.

FPP: You spent many years involved with the Favorite Poem Project Summer Poetry Institute; can you share some thoughts on the approach to poetry shared among teachers there?

MD: The physical pleasure of saying poems, and the fact that anyone can do it, is poetry's magic power. Poetry operates on our minds and imaginations through physical means, through rhythm and structure and sound. That's one of the things we emphasized at the institutes. It's quite a different thing for students to encounter a poem on paper, to read it silently to themselves, and to respond in writing to a list of leading questions about it, than it is for a student to hear or say the poem aloud, to begin with sound, with pleasure, as a place for discussion. People, especially young

people, like to *do* things, and like to do things for themselves. It's a common strategy in classrooms to get the students doing things—you know, hands-on learning—and reading poems aloud should be among the things they do.

An emphasis of the best lessons created by participants at the institute was autonomy. Introducing students to poetry by giving them the resources to seek and choose poems that speak in some way directly to them, with the added pressure of sharing those poems with the class, gives them a stake in the thing. Beginning a lesson or unit with the kind of personal connections demonstrated in the FPP videos makes a good first impression of poetry, and prepares students to look at poems more closely. Robert used to say you've got to like a thing to want to get to know it better. And we tend to like the things we choose. Poems are works of art, and poetry has been part of every culture since the beginnings of civilizations. Like dance, like representation, it is a human impulse. And students who are presented with a poem as a work of art, of expression founded in pleasure, rather than a confounding puzzle that must be solved, will be much more likely to want to spend time with it, to go deeper.

In brief: pleasure and freedom to choose first; analysis and terminology later.

FPP: 2020 has been a strange and difficult year, and educators have faced new challenges; what surprised you most as the teaching of poetry moved from an in-person to an online endeavor?

MD: Last March we all went on spring break thinking we'd see each other in a week and then never returned to the physical classroom. It's one thing to teach an online class that's designed to be an online class, a practice more

and more common at universities; it's another thing to drag an in-person class onto the Internet halfway through the semester.

Disparities in resources among my students meant in those early days I felt I couldn't require a synchronous component to the class, which meant our weekly Zoom session was optional, and all the graded work—assignments, feedback, discussion—happened online. I was surprised by how many of my students attended the weekly Zooms. I was surprised by how much good work we did together there in that space beyond grades and assessments, how rich our discussions were, how happy we were to see each other. We talked poems, but we also showed each other our dogs and cats and talked about how things were going. My students' dedication and resilience in that very tough stretch of time moved me. They all had the option of taking a "Pass" instead of a letter grade so they could have phoned it in during those final weeks. Every student took the grade they earned, and they all did well.

FPP: Do you have advice for someone just beginning a career in teaching poetry?

MD: A teacher is not the arbiter of answers. One of the most powerful things a teacher can say in a classroom is "I don't know." The phrase opens a door to discussion instead of slamming it shut before anyone's had the chance to cross the threshold.



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