

I ♥ MAINE POETRY

I must admit that I was quite surprised when governor-elect Paul LePage's camp announced that no poetry would be read at his gubernatorial inauguration. As the executive director of the Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance—a thirty-five-year-old nonprofit devoted to enriching the cultural life of Maine by supporting the literary arts—I paused when I heard this. Then I looked in the mirror and I asked myself: Have I been doing my job?

Let me be unequivocally clear: I don't agree with the decision to banish poetry from the inauguration. But perhaps we—and I mean the greater “we,” those of us who love poetry and literature—haven't been loud enough promoters as of late. In this age of up-to-the-minute, twenty-four-seven, multi-channel coverage of every global news story imaginable, I can perhaps understand why poetry has faded into the background of American political priorities. And so, I look forward to helping the LePage administration embrace not only Maine's rich literary legacy, but also its proud contemporary writers and poets.

So let me begin with a brief history lesson.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, born in Portland in 1807, became one of the most famous writers in America when “Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie” was published in 1847. When “Paul Revere's Ride” came out in 1860, that Boston silversmith, rebel, and American hero was largely forgotten—today, Revere's patriotism is ingrained in our nation's very sense of self.

Longfellow. Poet. History maker. Maine boy.

Then there's Edwin Arlington Robinson, born in Head Tide in Lincoln County, who won three Pulitzer prizes in poetry. Rockland native Edna St. Vincent Millay was the third woman to ever win the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry. When Louise Bogan became the United States Poet Laureate in 1945, I'm sure they were celebrating in her hometown of Livermore Falls.

But Maine's poetic prowess is not only historical—it is alive and thriving. One need look no further than our current Maine Poet Laureate Betsy Sholl and her engaging, accessible, vitally important work. Or the work of Adrian Blevins, Annie Finch, Richard Foerster, Stuart Kestenbaum, Wesley McNair, Ira Sadoff, Lee Sharkey, Jeffrey Thomson, and countless others.

But I could go on all day naming Maine's incredibly talented poets. You know who they are—as Betsy Sholl recently reminded me, everybody reads Maine's poetry: nurses, farmers, teachers, mechanics, police officers, fisherman, and recent immigrants. It has always been an inclusive art, not an exclusive one.

I am not going to spend even a moment stewing over or complaining about the unfortunate decision to exclude poetry from this gubernatorial inauguration—that is, other than to mention that there is a reason why poetry has been with us since the dawn of civilization, and why we still read and recite the poetry of Homer to this day, but hardly anyone knows who governed Greece during his lifetime. Poetry endures.

Instead of stewing, I'm going to spend every moment of my time spreading the word and celebrating the power of Maine's writers and great works of literature. I hope you'll join me.

Joshua Bodwell,
Executive Director
Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance