10 reasons why you should love poetry

by Gillian - Monday, April 13, 2015

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From coffee house slams to sidewalk chalk, poetry is booming - especially in Tucson. In celebration of National Poetry Month and the 32nd Tucson Poetry Festival, we give you ten reasons to love it. By Gillian Drummond.

Photo courtesy of Words on the Avenue

Ask Tucson poet and DJ Logan Phillips why this city is so poetry-rich and he tells you it's to do with the desert itself, our other-worldly landscape. It lends itself to introspection, says Logan, and in turn, to words. "It has something about it that causes people to stop and think and look at the sky and question what we are doing here and why things are how they are. There is a lot of silence and a lot of sky."

There is also a lot of noise, literally and figuratively. "It's so, so vibrant," says poet Elizabeth Salper of Tucson's poetry and literary scene. "Everyone is a collaborator and there's a real feeling of creating and doing new things."

Elizabeth does her part by delivering poems to her neighbors' sidewalks, riding around her midtown neighborhood on a bicycle with a basket full of chalk. Logan does his through spoken word poetry programs that reach into Tucson's schools and coffee houses. Both are examples of why poetry matters in Tucson, and why Tucson matters in poetry. Here are some more:
1. The University of Arizona Poetry Center. Since opening in 1960 (with a dedication by Robert Frost), the University of Arizona Poetry Center has built a collection of 70,000 items and brings poetry to more than 8,000 Arizona school students every year. It helps teachers with lesson plans and adults with community workshops. Plus, it’s a gorgeous place to visit. The current building, designed by Les Wallach and Line and Space, has won several architectural awards for its use of light, inside/outside spaces and for the overall design, based on the ‘progression towards solitude’ as it moves from busy public spaces to quiet areas of contemplation.
2. It’s hip (and hop). Hip hop has changed the landscape for poetry. The overlap between rap and spoken poetry, and poetry and music, is wide. In Tucson alone there are Ezra Letra, Queens-born and UA-educated poet and rapper, as well as Logan Phillips, who when he’s not writing poetry is DJ-ing as DJ Dirty Verbs. Poetry came first for Logan, whose new poetry book Sonoran Strange came out in January. The DJ-ing came about as a way for Logan and fellow poets to provide entertainment after readings and performances. Logan says being a poet has made him a better DJ, and that the two sometimes combine. "I think I do use the mike more than most DJ's and try to be conscious of how I'm playing and what I'm playing, just like in a poem."
3. The Tucson Poetry Festival. This year’s festival is spread over three days at Hotel Congress and will include poets Claudia Rankine and Bob Holman among the speakers. But don’t be shy if you don’t consider yourself a huge poetry fan. Writer, artist and the festival's executive director Teré Fowler-Chapman says one of her aims is to make the festival accessible to all. “And hopefully someone will leave a big fan.” More at tucsonpoetryfestival.org

4. It’s enticing the young folks. And let’s face it, when Tumblr and Snapchat are the competition, holding the attention of our youth is no mean feat. Somehow, though, poetry is doing it. Teens are revitalizing the spoken word through poetry youth slams – where they share their poems, often addressing injustice and politics, through stand-up competitions. Here in Tucson, the favorite venue for poetry slams is Bentley’s House of Coffee and Tea, where members of the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam meet monthly between Fall and Spring. The rules: they must be under 19 and their poem must be no more than three minutes long. (The 5th Annual Tucson Youth Poetry Slam Championship takes place Saturday April 18th).

Why all the interest in poetry among the younger generation? “They want to be heard as an adult and as a people. Poetry gives [them] a good way to do that,” says Tere who, with Logan Phillips, teaches creative writing at Eastpointe High School in Tucson. “The biggest thing young people [want] is to be heard and respected for thoughts. If you can share it through a poem it’s received differently.”

5. It connects us. Logan is also a co-director with Sarah Gonzales of Spoken Futures, Inc., whose after school program Liberation Lyrics uses spoken-word poetry to address social justice issues. He says: “The promise of connections through technology was a false promise in a lot of ways. Technology can connect us to people. The question is, what is the quality of that connection? People are seeking a more genuine
human interaction and that is storytelling that has been around for as long as we have been."

Elizabeth Salper, above and below, with one of her poetry chalkings in a midtown neighborhood of Tucson. Photo by Gillian Drummond

6. **It’s a happy thing.** Elizabeth Salper, a Tucson librarian who grew up in a poetry-rich household in Los Angeles (her father Donald has the blog *Living with Language*), knows how happy poetry makes her feel, how much it can change her mood. “I think sometimes poetry taps into a moment that might change someone’s day. Something alters. That’s what poetry can do, it can alter and lift you up.” That’s why she began her email newsletter *The Wednesday Poem*, which sends a poem to subscribers each Wednesday for free. And it’s why she recently started chalking poetry in Broadmoor, a Tucson midtown neighborhood. She carries chalk in the basket of her bicycle and print-outs of short poems she finds online – many of them Tweetable lengths. “It’s fun [for neighbors] to chance upon them. It’s unexpected. Everything is so lined up these days that I love the surprise of this,” she says.

7. **There’s a Tucson poet laureate.** Who knew? Her name is Rebecca Seiferle and she teaches college, as well as holds workshops for middle- and high-school students. Rebecca, who has published her own award-winning poetry, was appointed by the Mayor’s office. Which explains a lot, since…
8. … **Tucson’s Mayor is a poet.** Mayor Jonathan Rothschild is a member of the American Academy of Poets and the Poetry Society of America, and author of *The Last Clubhouse Eulogy* poetry collection. His love of poetry began with his mother reading to him from Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*. He still reads poetry (although has little time to write it these days), and has read his own at Hotel Congress as part of the Tucson Poetry Festival.
9. **Words on the Avenue.** Comedians have open mic night, but what about poets? Thanks to Tere Fowler-
Chapman, Words on the Avenue, gatherings at Café Passé on Tucson’s 4th Avenue, lets writers share their work. “I’ve seen so many people inspired by it,” says Teré of her project. Further down 4th Avenue, Casa Libre en la Solana also provides a venue for writers to read, as well as a place for workshops, meetings and residencies.

10. It’s portable. Part of National Poetry Month is the Poem in your Pocket Day, which this year happens April 30th. Launched in New York City, the project is now national and encourages people to carry a favorite poem in their pocket and share it with people. In New York, staff at Poets House hand out pocket-sized poems on the streets to passers-by. For information and print-out poetry designs, visit poets.org.

* Find out more about the Tucson Poetry Festival at tucsonpoetryfestival.org

* Visit the 5th Annual Tucson Youth Poetry Slam Championship at Tucson's Gallaher Theatre Saturday April 18th.

* Sign up for Elizabeth Salper's Wednesday Poem here.

More Tucson poetry connections:

* Barbara Kingsolver, author and poet, began her writing career in Tucson, where she lived for two decades.

* Alison Hawthorne Deming, author of four books on poetry, two anthologies and four non-fiction books, lives in Tucson and teaches at the University of Arizona.

* Poet Richard Siken lives in Tucson, where he helps to run Spork Press. His first poetry collection, Crush, wowed critics and won awards. His second, and long-awaited, War of the Foxes, is imminent.

* The Writers Studio, founded by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Philip Schultz, has a location in Tucson, as well as San Francisco, New York and Amsterdam. It encourages poets and writers to “try on voices” until they find theirs. As well as face-to-face and online classes, The Writers Studio is getting ready to branch into middle schools and high schools.

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