

RICHARD HANDLER: THE IDEAS GUY

Eat your poetry, it's good for you

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While browsing through the iTunes store recently, hoping to update my handy iPod, I came across a site I hadn't seen before: It's called poetryfoundation.org.

I clicked on it and before my eyes a landscape of poetic wonders appeared. To paraphrase the Romantic poet John Keats, I felt like the explorer Cortez, who with "eagle eyes" and "wild surmise" stumbled upon the glorious Pacific.

The site contained poetry, spoken and written, articles and features and links galore. There were marvelous textured podcasts, amiable, funny and well crafted by a radio producer, a real pro.

I was baffled. I couldn't understand how a site on poetry could muster the money to put on a display like this.

Poetry, of course, has a vast cultural reputation. And poets are considered by many to be, in Percy Bysshe Shelley's words, "the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

For a couple of centuries now, poets have even been the stand-ins for prophets in a religiously bereft age. All this carries oodles of cultural cachet. But the problem with poets is that few people actually read them.

The statistic I've heard is: One per cent. Of those who read anything.

Growth potential

So, poetry has great snob appeal, a tiny audience but (as a marketer would say) unlimited growth potential because it has nowhere to go but up.

Enter the great grandchild of Eli Lilly. She's a fledging poet and a pharmaceutical heiress (whose company, ironically, gave us Prozac, which you might say has replaced poetry as a mood enhancer).

In November of 2002, the 87-year-old Ruth Lilly gave Poetry magazine \$100 million. Read that figure in disbelief, as many announcers did at the time. The gift has been the subject of legal wrangles, but the money is apparently flowing.

Poetry is a famous magazine (for the one per cent of those who read). It began its life in 1912 and has published leading poets like T.S. Elliot and Wallace Stevens, among others. It currently has about 29,000 subscribers.

After trying to figure out to do with this princely sum, the editors of Poetry decided *not* to heap piles of cash on poets.

Instead, they decided to use its behest as an instrument of advocacy, via the internet. So they created the world's largest foundation for verse — and a rich web site.

Gobbling verse

It this way these editors joined the current bandwagon of poetry promoters, a group that includes such luminaries as Robert Pinsky and other U.S. Poet Laureates.

Pinsky was especially good at cruising the U.S., collecting the poems of ordinary people, and selling the idea of poetry to Americans who actually consume copious amounts of verse disguised as advertising. Some of it is quite masterful.

Poetry is language heightened and rearranged by the use of metaphor, incantation and visual play — and there's more around than we suspect.

In the interests of full disclose I must tell you this: I am part of this odd fraternity of the one per cent.

It's not that I'm an aesthete. The truth is I love poetry because, at heart, I'm lazy. Sure, you have to concentrate a little more. But the payoff is considerable. And much of it is quickly digestible.

Where else can you read a masterpiece in under a couple of minutes? With its concentrated language and conciseness, you get real bang for your buck.

It might take me months to read a fat novel, if I could even finish it. All those endless, closely observed details and those "He said ... She said." The very idea is daunting.

But read Mark Strand (born in PEI) and his "Eating Poetry." It's 18 lines. It's fun, sublimely silly and it rearranges the world in front of your face by scrambling its images:

*Ink runs from the corners of mouth
There is no happiness like mine
I have been eating poetry.*

The unknown knowns

Here's an added benefit: If you want please your senses while endeavouring to understand the Iraq war, you can read the poetry of Donald Rumsfeld.

In 2003, Slate Magazine published sayings from the press conferences of the former American defence secretary. It was then compiled into a book by Hart Seely, who argues that Rumsfeld is a damn good poet — paradoxical, playful and masterful in his evasions. Seely broke up the lines to look like poetry and it works.

Here's a Rumsfeldian offering that Seely titled "The Unknown." It stems from speculation about the link between Iraq and al-Qaeda.

*As we know
There are known knowns.
There are things we know we know.
We also know
There are known unknowns.
That is to say
We know there are some things
We do not know.
But there are also unknown unknowns
The ones we don't know
We don't know.*

Read it again. The words roll and lift off your tongue, rhythmically enticing. It's both funny and dangerous, like a rope that snakes across your body and into your mind: It traps and ties you up.

The poem tells us that truth is a hall of mirrors that is endless receding. Truth and untruth are phantoms. We should be wary.

This poem, and poetry generally, teaches us humility and complexity and to expect what we can't imagine quite yet. Rumsfeld, it turns out, is a good poet, but it's a pity he did not heed his own lines.

The lesson here, I suppose, is that poets can speak the truth but ignore what's inconvenient even when it comes out of their own mouth.

Now Rumsfeld can write his verse as a private citizen. He really should have listened to himself more closely.

