

P O E T R Y



F O U N D A T I O N

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LUCILLE CLIFTON WINS 2007 RUTH LILLY POETRY PRIZE

\$100,000 lifetime achievement award is one of largest to poets

CHICAGO—Poet Lucille Clifton is the winner of the 2007 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize. Established in 1986 and presented annually by the Poetry Foundation, the award is one of the most prestigious given to American poets, and at \$100,000 it is one of the nation's largest literary honors. Christian Wiman, editor of *Poetry* magazine and chair of the selection committee, made the announcement today. The prize will be presented at an evening ceremony at The Arts Club of Chicago on Wednesday, May 23.

In announcing the award, Wiman said: "Lucille Clifton is a powerful presence and voice in American poetry. Her poems are at once outraged and tender, small and explosive, sassy and devout. She sounds like no one else, and her achievement looks larger with each passing year."

Widely admired since Langston Hughes championed her work in an early anthology of African-American poetry, Clifton has become one of the most significant and beloved American poets of the past quarter century. She writes with great clarity and feeling about family, death, birth, civil rights, and religion, her moral intelligence struggling always to make sense of the lives and relationships to which she is connected, whether those of her immediate family, her African ancestry, or victims of war and prejudice.

The judges issued the following statement in making the selection: "One always feels the looming humaneness around Lucille Clifton's poems—it is a moral quality that some poets have and some don't. Her poems are local and funny, and have their own particular idiom; they speak big things in quiet ways, and she's voracious in the subject matter she takes on, spanning city and country, speaking for the unspoken, the sacred, and the invisible. Clifton has added enormously to the representation of the African-American experience in poetry and has been a kind of historical consciousness for her people and a public consciousness for us all."

"For nearly 40 years, Clifton has been shaping and chronicling our collective experience through her exquisite poetry," said John Barr, president of the Poetry Foundation. "The Poetry Foundation is honored to recognize the artistic achievements of Lucille Clifton, a poet unlike any other, with this year's Lilly Prize."

Clifton served as the poet laureate of Maryland from 1974 until 1985. She won the National Book Award in 2000 for *Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems, 1988-2000* (BOA, 2000). She is the author of 11 books of poetry, one autobiographical prose work, and 19 books for children. Her first volume of poetry, *Good Times*, was cited by the *New York Times* as one of 1969's 10 best books. Clifton's most recent collection of poetry is *Mercy* (BOA, 2004).

Clifton was the first author to have two books of poetry chosen as finalists for the Pulitzer Prize in the same year, *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir, 1969-1980* and *Next: New Poems*. Her many honors include the Shelley Memorial Prize, a Charity Randall Citation, an Emmy Award from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, a Lannan Achievement Award in Poetry, and selection as a Literary Lion by the New York Public Library. Her work is widely anthologized and has been translated into many languages, including Norwegian, Spanish, French, Japanese, Hebrew, and Serbian. Clifton holds honorary degrees from several institutions, including Dartmouth College, George Washington University, and Trinity College. She served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Clifton was born on June 27, 1936, in Depew, N.Y., and currently lives in Columbia, M.D. She was married to the educator, writer, and artist Fred Clifton, with whom she had six children. Clifton attended Howard University and Fredonia State Teachers College (now State University of New York, Fredonia). She is retired, but continues to teach at St. Mary's College of Maryland where she holds an appointment as Adjunct Distinguished Professor of Humanities and Friend of the College.

Judges for the 2007 prize were poets Linda Bierds, W. S. Di Piero, and Christian Wiman.

mulberry fields

by Lucille Clifton

they thought the field was wasting
and so they gathered the marker rocks and stones and
piled them into a barn they say that the rocks were shaped
some of them scratched with triangles and other forms they
must have been trying to invent some new language they say
the rocks went to build that wall there guarding the manor and
some few were used for the state house
crops refused to grow
i say the stones marked an old tongue and it was called eternity
and pointed toward the river i say that after that collection
no pillow in the big house dreamed i say that somewhere under
here moulders one called alice whose great grandson is old now
too and refuses to talk about slavery i say that at the
masters table only one plate is set for supper i say no seed
can flourish on this ground once planted then forsaken wild
berries warm a field of bones

bloom how you must i say

From *Mercy*. © 2004 by Lucille Clifton. Reprinted with the permission of BOA Editions Ltd.

About the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize

American poetry has no greater friend than Ruth Lilly. Over many years and in many ways, it has been blessed by her personal generosity. In 1985 she endowed the Ruth Lilly Professorship in Poetry at Indiana University. In 1989 she created Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowships, for \$15,000 each, given annually by the Poetry Foundation to undergraduate or graduate students selected through a national competition. In 2002 her lifetime engagement with poetry culminated in a magnificent bequest that will enable the Poetry Foundation to promote, in perpetuity, a vigorous presence for poetry in our culture.

The Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize honors a living U.S. poet whose lifetime accomplishments warrant extraordinary recognition. Established in 1986 by Ruth Lilly, the annual prize is sponsored and administered by the Poetry Foundation, publisher of *Poetry* magazine. Over the last 20 years, the Lilly Prize has awarded more than \$1,000,000. The previous recipients are Adrienne Rich, Philip Levine, Anthony Hecht, Mona Van Duyn, Hayden Carruth, David Wagoner, John Ashbery, Charles Wright, Donald Hall, A.R. Ammons, Gerald Stern, William Matthews, W.S. Merwin, Maxine Kumin, Carl Dennis, Yusef Komunyakaa, Lisel Mueller, Linda Pastan, Kay Ryan, C.K. Williams, and Richard Wilbur.

About the Poetry Foundation

The Poetry Foundation, publisher of *Poetry* magazine and one of the largest literary organizations in the world, exists to discover and celebrate the best poetry and to place it before the largest possible audience. The Poetry Foundation seeks to be a leader in shaping a receptive climate for poetry by developing new audiences, creating new avenues for delivery, and encouraging new kinds of poetry through innovative literary prizes and programs. For more information, please visit www.poetryfoundation.org.