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Mona Van Duyn

PHOTO BY THOMAS VICTOR

UNI Grad Wins Poetry Award

By Barbara Severin-Lounsberry

(This article is reprinted with the permission of The Iowan magazine, in which it originally appeared in Fall, 1971.)

“**A**stonishment” was the reaction of a former Waterloo resident upon receiving this year’s National Book Award for poetry, the highest praise this country offers its writers.

Mona Van Duyn, born in Waterloo in 1921 and an alumna of the University of Northern Iowa, won the award in March for a thoughtful and clever book of poems called *To See, To Take*.

“I am very much an Iowan,” Miss Van Duyn (Mrs. Jarvis Thurston) wrote recently from St. Louis, where she has taught writing and literature at Washington University.

Eldora’s “little savage”

Mona grew up in Eldora, where her father was a gasoline station operator and later a cigar store and newsstand manager. She remembers writing her first poems in second grade. Some lines from one of the poems in *To See, To Take*, “A Day in Late October,” perhaps give a clue to the early life of the young poet:

The helpless tribe in Iowa
could neither beat nor conjure
its little savage into line.
That child would scream at beasts,
at cows who lifted gaunt faces
to feast their bulged, hallucinating eyes
on her. When the corn grew over her head,
Reform School boys broke out
and hid in the cornrows till dark.
She hid with them
but she didn’t hop the freight,

Instead of the freight, in 1938 Mona took the road to Cedar Falls and the then Iowa State Teachers College. The only child of a loving, but

apparently protective mother “armed with pills, oils, drops, gargles, liniments, flannels,” college became quite a turning point for Mona:

She took me to college and alerted the school nurse.
I went in without looking back. For four years

I tested each step, afraid to believe it was me
bearing like a strange bubble the health of my body

as I walked the fantastic land of the ordinary.

More seriously, Mona stated recently that her memories of Cedar Falls include first taking herself seriously as a poet through the encouragement of former UNI English department head, Dr. B. E. Boothe, and his successor Dr. H. W. Reninger.

“Mona was a tall, attractive girl with a lithe, slim body and her hair and face were just as they are today, except younger,” writes Boothe from Bethesda, Md., where he is currently a high-ranking official in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

“I remember Mona’s demeanor, the friendliness of her smile, her sensitivity, and what struck me as a delicate and very unusual charm,” he says. “She was characteristically modest, rather shy on the surface, extremely receptive, and capable of opening up ingenuously and intelligently whenever invited to discuss anything that seemed relevant.”

Boothe had Mona in the freshman English course and found her a delight in class and a straight “A” student. “She impressed me as a person who had a most exceptional endowment for poetry and who also needed to use poetry as a way of examining and ordering her own perceptions.”

Boothe still sees Mona every year or two when government business takes him to St. Louis and says she has frequently sent him her poems in manuscript or handwriting before they’ve appeared in print.

H. W. Reninger remembers Mona as having a fine sense of humor and an imagination that seemed to touch everything. The poet's library proudly boasts a 30-year-old textbook used by Reninger for a course in Renaissance Poetry inscribed by him, "For Mona Van Duyn, who will understand more of this work than any student I've ever known."

Learning from Hearst

James Hearst, the well-known Midwestern poet from Cedar Falls, recalls Mona making the 3½-mile walk out to his farm, west of the city, to talk about poetry. "Mona was a bright, energetic and ambitious student," Hearst said. "She wasn't afraid to break new ground—which was something very unusual for students in those days."

Hearst modestly states that during those long talks with Mona on the farm he encouraged her but "probably gave her the wrong advice. I could see she was on the way to something. Her poetry was original. You could tell it was not the work of a committee."

Hearst describes Mona's college days as ones of searching. "She tried some traditional forms and free verse and she soon learned to cut and strip words down to the core."

Still screaming at cows, "sacred" cows this time, during college Mona wrote an article attacking the education system. She also found time to play the saxophone, serve on the Student Council and win two one-act play prizes.

Graduating with honors in 1942 with three majors—English, Speech and French—Mona then moved on to Iowa City and the Writer's Workshop. There she earned her master's degree, taught, worked two years on her Ph.D., hopped a "freight" for Greenwich Village but hopped off again, and went back to Iowa City to marry her fiance Jarvis Thurston, who is currently on the English faculty at Washington University.

In 1947 the two founded *Perspective*, a quarterly journal of literature, which they still edit. Jarvis and Mona have always supported the operation themselves through their teaching, first at the University of Louisville in Kentucky and after 1950, at Washington University.

Besides teaching, the succeeding years have been spent editing and writing. Mona has published three volumes of poetry (*Valentines to the Wide World*, *A Time of Bees* and *To See, To Take*), two short stories, three critical articles and some sixty reviews for newspapers and literary journals. She also has won a number of poetry awards including the 1969-70 Bollingen Prize which she shared with fellow poet Richard Wilbur.

"Beatles and bennies"

Mona's own favorite poet is William Butler Yeats and she says she writes on any subject any time she has an idea for a poem. A reader picking up *To See, To Take* will find that often she treats the universal topics of love and suffering, striving and self-seeking, in modern 1970 language. Some lines from "Eros to Howard Nemerov" suggest a bit of her philosophy:

.. to do my stuff I'll use what I can of the jibe
and jazz and Beatles and bennies and Twiggy girls . . .

..... Let's take San Francisco:
Out on the campus things are going so-so—
nude-in or love-in, it's what is going to come out

that I'm most concerned with, naturally, and signs
are no substitute for siblings

In another poem she takes off on the somewhat shocking ads that appear in such underground newspapers as "The Berkeley Barb":

Boy seeks cute girlfriend to share his sack
How startling now the classic or pastoral!
and lists his qualifications to attract:
"tall, dark, sensitive, handsome, sterile."

But there is another side of Mona that is neither satirical nor "screaming." This is Mona Van Duyn, the poet of love, who wrote "my bow still shoots for the sweetest dream the human creature can have, the dream of possibility." The Mona who wrote "I bless all knowledge of love, all ways of publishing it." The anger and satire are simply reactions to a great love and idealism that have been disappointed—disappointed by people or a world unthinking or unwilling to live up to high ideals.

Van Duyn vs. Ginsberg

Mona revealed both sides of her nature during the furor which accompanied her March award. During the final voting for the National Book Award prize, poet Allen Ginsberg, one of the five poetry judges, made known his disgust with his fellow panelists' unanimous selection by burning incense during the award announcement and calling *To See, To Take* "ignominious, insensitive and mediocre."

Undaunted, the Waterloo-born, Eldora-grown screamer-at-cows generously replied that she liked differences in poetry and apparently Mr. Ginsberg did not. Offering a metaphor about a restroom wall covered with dirty words along with a heart enclosing the names of lovers, she stated: "I notice the obscenities but write about the heart and lovers. Ginsberg notices the heart but writes about the obscenities. Both are there, and both are valid subjects for poetry."