

## *Interview with Ava Leavell Haymon: Poet Laureate of Louisiana*

### Biography

Ava Leavell Haymon, poet laureate of the state of Louisiana, is a poet, playwright, and teacher. Her poems have appeared in many journals; in five chapbooks from independent small presses; and in four full collections, *The Strict Economy of Fire*, *Kitchen Heat*, *Why the House Is Made of Gingerbread*, and *Eldest Daughter*, all from LSU Press. *Why the House Is Made of Gingerbread* was awarded the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters 2011 Award in Poetry and was chosen by Women's Voices for Change as one of the 10 best poetry books of 2010. She teaches poetry writing in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, during the academic year and in New Mexico in the summer, where she directs a retreat center for writers and artists. She has directed workshops and read her poems widely, in the United States and in Canada.

Her plays are written for adult theatre troupes to perform for children. She has performed often in collaborative concerts with musicians, dancers, actors, and other writers, and has written text for composers and dance companies. Her poems have been set to music by several contemporary composers, jazz and classical both.

She and her husband Cordell Haymon live in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where they've raised two children, assorted dogs and cats, and as much ruckus as they could get away with legally.

### Interview

**Louisiana Libraries:** Is it still important for poets to memorize poems—their own or those of others?

**Ava Leavell Haymon:** Certainly it was important to me, even formative. It's not required in school anymore, but I don't remember doing it in school so much as at home. Most all of the poets I talk to say they memorized poems as a child, not for any assignment or suggestion, but simply out of a profound

interest in the sound. Spoken Word poets do memorize their own poems, of course, and that is affecting the performance styles of us "page" poets. As the poetry pendulum swings back toward its oral roots (which is the wonderful direction we are going at this point in poetry's history), memorization will follow quite naturally.

I myself memorized a great many poems from my earliest years. My mother read poems to me, as many times as I wanted, from Mother Goose to Shakespeare sonnets. I can still quote my way through "The Raven," if I don't get caught in that loop at the end of the 3rd stanza, and I often find myself repeating Coleridge when I am hiking. I am incapable of pushing a child in a swing without "How I Do Like to Go Up in a Swing," all four stanzas of it, and maybe more than once, whether the child likes it or not.

In addition, my father required me to memorize ten verses of scripture every Sunday and stand and recite it to him. If not, no TV or comics for the week. I can repeat many of those passages, too. Best of all, I can say the books of the Bible in a single breath. That was not a required feat, but it's a good party trick.

**Louisiana Libraries:** Assuming you could meet any poet living or dead, who would you choose and why?

**Ava Leavell Haymon:** I'm terrible at meeting important people. I am immediately stricken with the inability to say a single word, and my face goes into weird contortions. I met John Cage, right before he



died, and I was so star-struck, I couldn't even hold out my hand. Another time, I was introduced to a basketball star, 6'9", and I took his hand and then fell forward over his forearm (about the height of my face) and couldn't let go, just froze there. Therefore, sadly, I'll have to confess that the poet apparition would be wasted on me. Along this line, however, I'd LOVE to hear Gerard Manley Hopkins read his poems aloud.

**Louisiana Libraries:** If Governor Bobby Jindal requested that you to come to the mansion and asked you the following question: "What is the bottom line of poetry, and why does Louisiana education need it?", how would you respond?

**Ava Leavell Haymon:** So many students in our state, children and adults alike, suffer violent and frightening experiences. Until these experiences are expressed, the student is distracted and can't focus on math and reading. Writing poems can give them a vehicle for this expression. Younger children love poems, read aloud, for the pure sound. They make the connection naturally that those inscrutable black marks on the page have given them pleasure and emotion. And they learn that words and narratives which carry emotion can be safely expressed that way. What a boost to early literacy!

With older children, from about the third grade (through 90 years old, actually), I believe we can begin with poetry WRITING. The poem itself, small and bounded, becomes a container for the student's experiences and emotions. This is even more enabling if—maybe especially if—the experiences or emotions are expressed indirectly, which the poem invites. As I've learned from my own experience, poems are tough. They can hold anything.

Spoken Word poetry usually begins as a poem on the page, but because from the first it's conceived as live performance, it connects to some students even more immediately. I've had high schoolers as well as college students tell me, "I just didn't get the point of school until Spoken Word."

Do we need a one-sentence explanation for a governor? Then here it is: Education research shows that children with access to art of any kind learn their core subject matter more quickly and remember it longer. Please fund arts education!

**Louisiana Libraries:** Your latest collection, *Eldest Daughter*, covers some troubled ground. Was it hard to put the poems on paper?

**Ava Leavell Haymon:** Yes, troubled ground, indeed. *Eldest Daughter* concerns itself with religion and its distortions, with secrets, pedophilia, father-daughter incest, with memory and language and their twin roles in survival. It also concerns itself with the profound life force of family, a love that ultimately chooses life over silence, and many parts of it are wildly funny. Most of the book, I'm told, is really fun to read.

Each poem in the collection had a different process, slow to present itself, or fast, some downright exciting to write and some emotionally wrenching. More difficult than writing the poems was sharing them with anyone. With the more revealing poems, every small step into further communication—sending it to a friend, reading to group of close friends, reading in public, submitting to small journal -- was accompanied by fear and anguish. Letting go the book itself was one of the hardest things I've ever done.

The poems in this collection were not written to be a book. They came one at a time, seemingly unrelated to each other. And they presented themselves in no order whatsoever, certainly not the one that you now see in the collection. I wrote them over a time span of 30 plus years. During that time, I taught almost every semester. I reared children. I cooked meals. And I wrote many, many other poems. I wrote plays, essays, I published chapbooks, I published books. But these particular poems never grouped themselves with any of the others.

Several years ago, from a dusty corner, a stack of uncollected poems seemed to be waving at me. Finished poems. Many of them already published in poetry journals and in chapbooks. I had never thought of them as a potential book manuscript. They didn't seem to "go together." They sounded as if they'd been written by several different people—all varieties of diction, voice, style, syntax, and, of course, maturity of craft. One thing only they shared: every poem was about my father. I sensed that making that disheveled stack into a book would be more painful than writing them had been. I didn't want to do it.

Something, however, was still waving. I was 65 or

66 then. If I didn't break this secret now—somehow devise a readable order, shove it all into a book, let it go into the world—then I'd never do it. My dilemma seemed almost biblical, like some hoary Old Testament prophet given the burden of a message he did not want to deliver.

When I say “the burden of a message,” I am not overstating. I believe strongly that all of us, women especially, need to talk more freely about these horrific matters. There is still a taboo on the victim/survivor's speaking about it. Yet, this kind of abuse happens much more frequently than we like to think. Much of it is never told at all but remains shrouded in secrecy and shame, and when this happens, the victim bears all the guilt and repression. Without clarifying and breaking the hold of the secret, healing is impossible. Yes, this happened to me, but I have the advantages of an art form that can contain it, a praxis in which I could examine it in tiny bits and pieces over years and years, and the voice and standing to communicate it. My great hope is that this book is a help to those who do not have a voice or these advantages. The book is not yet a year old, but already a number people have bought the book to give to a friend or client struggling with memories of pedophilia, clergy abuse, or incest. Truth telling begets truth telling, and perhaps some of these will gain the courage to speak. More than one woman has told me that just seeing the book, and knowing what was in it, dissolved a lifelong feeling of loneliness.

Poetry is not therapy, but it is a healing art. I hope to continue to teach the praxis, the slow meditative daily writing practice, that makes this healing art possible.

**Louisiana Libraries:** Do you write poems quickly or return to them year after year until you are pleased with the writing?

**Ava Leavell Haymon:** The length of time it takes me to finish a poem varies, but I'll outline a typical case. Always, what comes to me first is some words, not an image, not an idea, not an emotion. These words come to me almost audibly and in my own speaking voice. They come with this urgent command: Get a pencil! So I obey, and I write the words down. Then I spend a lot of time, maybe over days or months, sitting with those words or lines, giving them my attention. The lines begin to

enlarge, new words, new lines appear. All this, I tell my students, needs to be done in a kind of peaceful but brain-storming frame of mind, akin to the process Karl Jung called “active imagination.” I have learned to turn off my own evaluative inner voices, voices that say: This is awful. OR, just as repressive: This is great! ANY evaluation breaks into the pure openness that the poem-voice requires to complete its mission.

After that, I need a tolerance for not having the answer. I'm a rather impatient person, always in a hurry, and this comes hard for me, but, as a teacher, I know it's harder for many other poets. Some fail their poems, at just this stage. If you are an efficient, effective person, one who makes decisions easily and follows through, you probably squirm when you are in a state of indecision. The itch of not having an answer may drive you to “think” of a word quickly, add a line, an ending, when the poem hasn't revealed itself. You must sit with non-knowing, as long as it takes. It's a humble position, actually. You are not in control as the poem manifests itself, the poem is. You give in and wait. As long as it takes.

When a poem is taken to a workshop at this point, it is often silenced, sometimes forever. Well-meaning group members might say “such and such would sound better here.” And that might sound so good, the poet is intimidated out of the humble position of waiting. Best to keep the poem absolutely private, a secret relationship between poet and poem, or at least to tell the group the poem is still in the “growth” stage and comments should be limited to “I don't quite understand what you are getting at in line 3.” No suggestions, no evaluations allowed!

Finally, the poem comes into a full draft, quickly or slowly, at its own pace. Now comes what we call revision. I allow my evaluative voices into the process here, but very cautiously. The poem has revealed itself to me, but now it needs help to speak to the outside world. How would strangers read this? What will make this clear to them? The evaluative voices can be trained to be very good editors, and specifically, at the very end of the process, excellent copy editors.

A very early poem of mine, “Continental Divide, Loveland Pass, CO,” is in my latest collection, *Eldest Daughter*. Years ago I pronounced that poem

*done*. I thought it was *wonderful*. But there was one small spot that was not quite what I was trying to say. I couldn't get right. I knew a little about what it would sound like, meter-wise, vowel-wise, I knew it was one word, but I simply couldn't come up with that one word. It turned out I didn't yet know the word. Eighteen years went by, the poem sifted its way down in the tall pile of unfinished poems or bits of poems. Then one day I was reading a book about medieval farming, probably just for fun. I read there the word "smallholding." SNAP! That was it. I dug out the Continental Divide poem, added that one word, and knew the poem was finished. That's the longest time I've ever had to tolerate non-knowing. It's also one of my favorite poems.

**Louisiana Libraries:** A number of your books have been published by LSU Press. How have you enjoyed a relationship with the press that few authors experience?

**Ava Leavell Haymon:** I've been blessed. LSU Press has published all four of my full-length collections of poems. Their poetry list—which means the poetry books and poets they've published since the Press was established—includes three Pulitzer prizes, a National Book Award winner, and quite a few finalists for the National Book Award. The Press's poetry list is much more widely known and admired outside the state than in. I believe the Press publishes only two poets who currently live in Louisiana, Brenda Marie Osbey and me. Martha Serpas will join us a year from now, with the second book in a series I'm selecting and editing, the Barataria Poetry Series. Many manuscripts are sent to the Press, hundreds, but they only publish 12 poetry books per year.

The decision of which collections to publish is not made in-house. Manuscripts with promise are sent to "outside readers," poets of national recognition who have agreed to read and to comment on what the press sends them. It is the outside reader who decides if the manuscript is published or not.

The process can be a little ominous for the poet submitting the manuscript. The outside reader is kept anonymous. Even the gender is kept a secret. The outside reader writes a short essay/critique of the manuscript and then says "publish" or "do not publish." My outside readers have in three cases

said, "yes, but..." and then posed issues that needed resolving before the manuscript was up to Press standards. In all cases, after a spell of crying and stomping and feeling misunderstood, I buckled back down to work on the manuscript, and, as you'd guess, each one improved enormously. After that, the revised manuscript goes back to the mysterious (heartless) stranger, and the final judgment is made. Les Phillabaum cultivated an extraordinary group of outside readers, and these relationships have been maintained by John Easterly and MaryKatherine Calloway.

Because I've published with them before, my manuscripts always get a "read." This alone is a blessing because they are often so backed up publishing what they've accepted that they are not reading new manuscripts. But any manuscript of mine still has to go to the anonymous outside reader with the distinct possibility of rejection.

**Louisiana Libraries:** You have been active as the Louisiana Poet Laureate. What are some of your goals?

**Ava Leavell Haymon:** My goals are these: First, I hope to bring together poets from all parts of the state. We tend to live in little silos, the New Orleans poets, the Lafayette poets, the Shreveport poets, etc. We need to combine our work, to encourage each other, and to make common political cause. I'm setting up a social network now, a kind of registry of Louisiana poets that will make possible our contacting each other regularly.

Second, I hope to encourage the Spoken Word/Slam poets and the more traditional "page" poets to learn from each other. Both groups have skills that the other needs. Written poems have a tendency to grow dense, too intellectual and "precious." The roots of poetry are oral, however, and every 50 years or so, the pendulum swings back in that direction. In the 1860s, an era of mannered, metered, rhyming verse, Walt Whitman wrote in contemporary American speech, and the course of American poetry followed him. Then, slowly, poetry became more "literate," more something to read and study than something to read or proclaim aloud. But in the 1950s, Allen Ginsburg began the swing back in the direction of the oral. Since then, it's been slowly swinging in the direction of something to be read on the page and not

read aloud. The huge groundswell of Spoken Word poetry is the antidote we page poets need. Louisiana has the finest Spoken Word poets in the country. If we page poets can pick up some of their performance skills, energy and emotional passion, and they can absorb some of our precision and a bit more of our “page-craft,” then Louisiana would be a poetry mecca for the world.

Third, I would like to advocate for arts education in all classrooms. As I said above, research shows that children learn better when they have the arts available in their schools. It provides them an outlet for expressing themselves and their emotions, and that clears the mind for other matters. Like geography or math.

Fourth, I hope to bring into our discourse the idea that ALL of us have the ability to use words to find meaning in our experiences, in chaos and loss, joy and sadness. When we talk, when we write even a grocery list, we are using this grand tool, the contemporary American English language. With a little confidence, we can turn the skills we already have into a way to explore our lives, process our experience, and engage our own native creativity.

**Louisiana Libraries:** Can poetry save a soul?

**Ava Leavell Haymon:** Even though I’m a preacher’s daughter, I wouldn’t feel qualified to answer THAT question! I do believe, however, that poetry and writing poems can invest our lives with meaning. Having taught so many people poetry writing, I’ve come to realize that if I am encouraging someone to write a poem, I am essentially asking him or her, “Who are you?” I don’t say that directly, of course, because it would scare ANYONE into silence. But whenever an authentic truth-telling poem is written, my question begins to be answered. It may take a lifetime of writing poems before the poet articulates an answer that seems clear, but the question is looming the entire time, to be answered in bits and pieces, small steps, poem after poem. The permission to say who we are is a fundamental need of every human being on this earth.

Those who read or listen to this authentic poetry participate in the freedom and courage of the poet and are stimulated to say who they are, too. Speaking truth, slowing down to take our moments seriously,

spending time in silence with a pen to record whatever comes --this elicits similar behavior in return. We often skitter over the surface, too royally entertained to know our interior life. But it’s in that interior life that we will find our place in these present moments we inhabit. Steadily, pleasurably, and inexorably, poetry and poem writing will take us there.

*Dayne Sherman is an associate professor at Sims Memorial Library, Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond. His website is [daynesherman.com](http://daynesherman.com), where he blogs, tweets and is on Facebook.*

