



# The NCB News

Volume 11

Spring 2001

No. 1

A Publication of the Nebraska Center for the Book

## Tenth Nebraska Literature Festival Set for September 21-22

by Peggy Williams,  
Peru State College

**O**n September 21 and 22, Peru State College will host the Nebraska Center for the Book's 2001 Nebraska Literature Festival. The theme of the tenth Nebraska Literature Festival is "The Writing Life." The two-day festival will provide activities for students and adults.

Writing workshops with featured writers are planned for high school and college students on Friday morning. Afternoon sessions will include groups of authors reading individually, and panels of authors talking about why they write, how they write, and why they choose particular genres. Nebraska poets Bill Kloefkorn and Don Welch will be honored Friday evening at a testimonial dinner at the Lied Center in Nebraska City.

Saturday events include author panel discussions, sessions on writing, an evening cookout, fiddlers'



Peru State College Campus

contest, and open-mike poetry reading. For more information see the Nebraska Literature Festival Web site at <<http://bobcat.peru.edu/~humanity/litfest/index.html>> or contact Dr. Andrew Elkins, Peru State College, 308-432-6307, e-mail: <[aelkins@csc.edu](mailto:aelkins@csc.edu)>. ▲

## Book Award Nominations Sought

**T**he 2001 Nebraska Book Awards program, sponsored by the Nebraska Center for the Book (NCB), will recognize and honor books that are written by Nebraska authors, published by Nebraska publishers, set in Nebraska, or that relate to Nebraska.

Books published in 2000, as indicated by the copyright date, are eligible for nomination. They must be professionally published, have an International Standard Book Number (ISBN), and be bound. Books may be entered in one or more of the following categories: Nonfiction, Fiction, Children/Young Adult, Cover Design/Illustrations, and Poetry. Certificates will be awarded to the winners in each category. Award winners will be announced at

the Nebraska Literature Festival on September 21. The winning books will be displayed at the Literature Festival. Winners will be entitled to display award stickers on their book covers. The entry fee is \$35 per book and per category entered. Deadline for entries is **June 30**. Entry forms are available from the Nebraska Library Commission home page, <[www.nlc.state.ne.us](http://www.nlc.state.ne.us)>, search on 2001 Book Awards or contact Mary Geibel, 402-471-2045, 800-307-2665, e-mail: <[mgeibel@nlc.state.ne.us](mailto:mgeibel@nlc.state.ne.us)> for print information. Enter by sending the entry form, three copies of the book, and the entry fee to NCB Book Awards Competition, Nebraska Library Commission, The Atrium, 1200 N Street, Suite 120, Lincoln, NE 68508-2023. ▲



# Guest Editorial: State Centers and the National Center for the Book

*by Molly Fisher,*  
Founding  
Member and  
President of the  
Nebraska Center  
for the Book

*T*wice in 2000, I attended meetings of state centers for the book, one at the national Idea Exchange in Washington, D.C., with centers from all over the country, and the second a regional conference of centers from our area, including Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming. There are only nine states in the country that do not have Centers for the Book, and that includes neighbors South Dakota and Iowa.

While all the centers have a common goal of promoting reading and the book, each center operates very differently and has differing sizes of boards and activities. The Kansas Center, for example, is housed at the Topeka Public Library. The director is a member of the Topeka Public Library staff. Colorado's is an independent organization and actually has a center in an historic house in Denver. Their director is one of two paid staff members. Many of the centers have varying relationships with other state organizations and institutions—Nevada, Montana, Delaware, and Tennessee have become a part of the state Humanities Councils. Others are located in public libraries or the state library, and each center scrambles to find sources for funding.

Nebraska's Center for the Book (NCB) is comprised of volunteers. The director and staff are

volunteers, and there is wonderful support from organizations, board members, partners, and volunteers. Since the beginning, when I first met with Jane Geske, Dick Allen, Carol Connor, Ron Hull, Bob Runyon, and Rod Wagner, we saw the Center for the Book as a partnership of several organizations. In its early years, the Center was housed at the Bennett Martin Public Library in Lincoln. Our mailing address is now the Nebraska Library Commission. Both the Nebraska Library Commission and the Nebraska Humanities Council continue to provide financial support for NCB's numerous activities. The Literature Festival has flourished because of the Nebraska Humanities Council. The publications have grown because of the support of the Library Commission. The work of the Center has grown because of an active group of volunteers. Laureen Riedesel, past-president of NCB, has fostered the Letters about Literature program. Jerry Kromberg, Dee Yost, and Rod Wagner developed our new Book Awards program. Our activities are archived at the Nebraska Library Commission.

If you want to help, please become a member. Membership is our major source of income. We welcome your help with any of our programs. Just contact us! If you are interested in being a board member or volunteer, let us know. We need you! ▲

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## The **NCB** News

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### Nebraska Center for the Book Board and Committees

#### By-Laws

Molly Fisher, President; Joan Birnie, Vice President/President Elect; Katherine Walter, Past President; Dee Yost

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Gerry Cox, Committee Chair; Richard Allen; Shelly Clark; Oliver Pollak; Mary Jo Ryan, staff

#### Awards Art Coordinator

Denise Brady

Nebraska Library Commission Director Rod Wagner is an ex officio member of all committees.

#### 2001 Nebraska Center for the Book Board Meetings

##### May 5

University of Nebraska at Omaha Library, 9:30 A.M.

##### August 11

Broken Bow Library, 9:30 A.M.

##### November 4, Annual Meeting in Lincoln, Gere Library

2-3 P.M., Membership Meeting

3-4 P.M., Board Meeting

#### Advertising

*The NCB News* can accept up to four 1/8 page ads for each issue. The advertising rate is \$125 for 1/8 page. *NCB News* is issued May 1, August 15, and November 1. The advertising and copy deadline is six weeks prior to issue date. For details, contact Mary Jo Ryan, Nebraska Center for the Book, The Atrium, 1200 N Street, Suite 120, Lincoln, NE 68508-2023; phone 402-471-2045, 800-307-2665, e-mail: <mjryan@nlc.state.ne.us>.

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All book cover art reprinted by permission of the publisher.

# American Readers in Paris

by **Oliver B. Pollak**,  
Department of  
History, University  
of Nebraska at  
Omaha

**W**e were last in Paris in 1971. We stayed on the right bank for four days, had a car, and kept a diary.

*Karen was pregnant. We visited Paris again this last Christmas and New Year. We stayed on the left bank for eleven days and we walked. Our son Noab is twenty-nine.*

During the intervening thirty years Paris and the Pollaks have changed. Where you stay, how you get around, and a half a lifetime of experiences change your perception. I remember food, wonderful architecture, and an oozing cosmopolitanism. What was new to me, but had obviously been there all along, was the extraordinary bookishness of the city. Small and large, new, used, and antiquarian bookstores were everywhere. Bookstalls lined the Seine and a few bookbinders were still plying their craft. Did I not notice this in 1971? How could I have forgotten this? Perhaps it was the longer stay and being closer to the ground. Perhaps, too, it was the fact that we stayed in the fifth arrondissement, which contains the Sorbonne, a university founded in the 1250s.

I counted bookstores in the Jaune (Yellow) pages. It confirmed my observation. The fifth and adjoining sixth arrondissements contained 246 new and 119 second-hand bookstores. All of Paris, a population of ten million people in twenty districts, contained 779 new and 254 used bookstores, not including street vendors. Beyond the stores that specialized in archeology, art, religion, theatre, travel, or cookbooks, there were stores that featured African, Canadian, Greek, Hispano-American, Japanese, Polish, Russian, Southeast Asian, Spanish, and Tibetan literature. Some of these bookstores go back to the 1930s. One seller

said his store goes back four generations. Ironically, the guide to this maze of bookstores, *Le Répertoire des Librairies Spécialisées de Paris*, published by Serpent de Mar and surveying 430 bookstores under 130 special interest categories, appeared only to be available for use by booksellers.

Americans are drawn to **Shakespeare and Company** on Rue de la Bucherie, **The San Francisco Book Company**, and the historic and sinuous **Brentanos on Avenue de l'Opera**. We even ate at a very fine chic restaurant, Les Bookinistes, but it has nothing to do with books. Now for a couple of curiosities: French hardbacks and paperbacks have distinctively Gaullist bindings, typography, and paper. The French generally put the table of contents in the back and don't seem to index as assiduously as the English language publishing industry. And, if you go to an Internet cafe, be prepared to find the letters a and m relocated on the keyboard to accommodate the French accent marks. While we were in Paris, the New Yorker columnist,

*continued on page 10...*

## What is the Nebraska Center for the Book?

The Nebraska Center for the Book brings together the state's readers, writers, booksellers, librarians, publishers, printers, educators, and scholars to build the community of the book. We are the people who know and love books, and who value the richness they bring to our lives. Our Nebraska Center supports programs to celebrate and stimulate public interest in books, reading, and the written word. We have been an affiliate of the Library of Congress National Center for the Book since 1990.

## Join the Nebraska Center for the Book

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

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Name/address of a friend who might be interested in NCB membership:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- \$15 Individual Membership
- \$25 Organizational Membership
- \$50 Octavo Membership
- \$100 Quarto Membership
- \$250 Folio Membership

**Please send this form and a check to:  
Nebraska Center for the Book  
The Atrium, 1200 N Street, Suite 120  
Lincoln, NE 68508-2023**

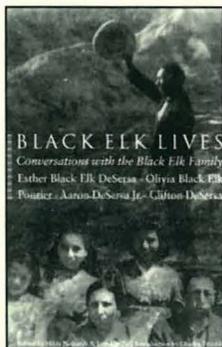
# Review: **Black Elk Lives: Conversations with the Black Elk Family**

by **Esther Black**

**Elk DeSersa**,  
editor, et al.

University of  
Nebraska Press;  
ISBN:  
080323340X;  
Dec. 2000;  
Hardcover

**Reviewed by**  
**Christine**  
**Pappas**, editor,  
Plains Song  
Review



*Black Elk Speaks*, written by John Neihardt in 1931, introduced the world to Lakota holy man Nicholas Black Elk. Black Elk spoke through his interpreter son Ben to Neihardt whose daughter Enid took notes. The book *Black Elk Speaks* details the life and beliefs of the Lakota and Black Elk's own experiences as a holy man with a great vision. Neihardt received much praise for giving a mouthpiece to the words of the Lakota without altering the stories for his own purposes.

Almost seven decades later, in *Black Elk Lives: Conversations with the Black Elk Family*, members of the Black Elk family sat again for white cultural interpreters, telling the story of Black Elk and who he was. Neihardt's daughter Hilda, and Lori Utecht, former director of the Neihardt Center in Bancroft, listened and recorded the conversations of Black Elk's granddaughters, Esther DeSersa and Olivia Pourier, as well as his great-grandsons, Aaron DeSersa, Jr. and Clifton DeSersa. The conversations ranged from Black Elk's life itself to the clash between native and white cultures.

The editors of *Black Elk Lives* take a back seat to their subjects. Hilda Neihardt writes in her introduction, "Lori and I posed questions primarily for the sake of continuity and clarification. We intended to serve only as facilitators for the Black Elks' conversations." Therefore, the form and substance of this

book is shaped by the Black Elks and not their editors.

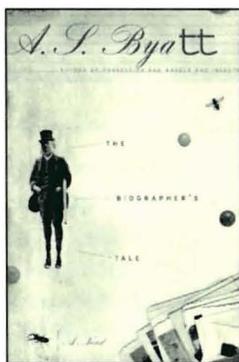
Looming large in the subject of Black Elk's life was his purported conversion to Catholicism. For the Lakota holy man—who had seen the great vision—to convert raises questions about the authenticity of his religion. His family goes to great lengths to explain this paradox by telling how the two religions were meshed in his, and their, minds. The last page of the book explains that Christianity could never have superseded his Lakota faith because, as Olivia put it, "He already knew the holiness of everything—the earth, the sun, the moon and the stars—everything! Grandpa was already a holy man."

The main message Black Elk's great-grandsons relate in *Black Elk Lives* is that meshing white modern culture with native culture is leading to the demise of the Indian. For example, letting whites participate in sweats or dances makes the experience cheaper because it becomes unauthentic. I find their view understandable, but also extreme. Black Elk, by including Neihardt in his intimate circle, made the ways of the Lakota more understood by whites. Black Elk's son, Benjamin, went to Mount Rushmore in the summers and taught tourists about his culture. Whether these attempts to bridge the gap between red and white through communication are good or bad, it seems interesting to me that Black Elk's great-grandsons have abandoned that strategy. ▲

# Review: **The Biographer's Tale**

by **A. S. Byatt**  
Knopf (Random  
House); ISBN:  
0375411143;  
Jan. 2001;  
Hardcover

**Reviewed by**  
**Oliver B.**  
**Pollak**



This is Booker Prize Winner Byatt's fifteenth book, and the first of her books that I have read. She left the academic world in 1983 to become a full-time writer. An advertisement in the Sunday newspaper had me purchasing the book by 11 A.M. and finishing it in the wee small hours of Monday.

I cannot resist novels that combine the writing process and biography in a university setting.

Phineas G. Nanson, disenchanted with his post-modernist graduate studies, turns to an old saw, biog-

raphy. He becomes fascinated with the biographer, Destry Sholes-Destry who wrote three volumes on Sir Elmer Boles, a Sir Richard Francis Burton-type character. If you like stories within stories and literary detective work, you will be intrigued by Byatt's linking Destry-Sholes to Henrik Ibsen, Francis Galton, and the seventeenth century Swedish scholar, Linneaus.

Unfortunately for Phineas, there is not enough material on Destry-Sholes to produce a biography on his chosen subject. But there is ample material for Byatt to expound on the biographic process, including (on pages thirty-one through thirty-four) a very useful primer, in italics, on the limitations of the true biographer to the facts at hand, and the temptations that lead the writer into speculation and fiction. ▲

# Shively Presents Program on Alvin Saunders Johnson

by Dick Allen

*“Middle-western crossed with the classics.” In these words Alvin Saunders Johnson, born near Homer on December 18, 1874, described himself. Born of farming Danish parents, he never gave up his agricultural roots, even though he was to become a distinguished American scholar, administrator, and writer.*

At the 2001 Nebraska Center for the Book Annual Meeting, Professor Steve Shively described this underrated prominent Nebraskan. Underrated, he said, perhaps because his accomplishments were more on the national than state level. In 1897, he received a bachelor's degree in the classics and in 1898 a master's degree in Greek, both from the University of Nebraska, where his freshman math instructor was John Pershing (General Pershing of World War I fame). During the Spanish-American War, he spent a year at an army camp in Georgia. Then it was on to Columbia University in New York City, to study political science and economics. In 1902, he received his Ph.D. in Economics, with his dissertation “Rent in Modern Economic Theory” published the following year.

His academic career included appointments at Bryn Mawr, Columbia, the University of Nebraska, the University of Chicago, and Cornell. (He is given credit for bringing Hartley Burr Alexander to the University of Nebraska.) In 1917, he turned from teaching to become editor of the *New Republic*, holding this position until 1923.

In 1919, Alvin Johnson, Charles A. Beard, James Harvey Robinson, Thorsten Veblen, and others founded the New School for Social Research in New York City, an adult education school with emphasis on the social sciences. In 1923 he became president of the New School, securing funds for a new building (1930) and during the 1930s, creating the “University in Exile,” a home for some 180 European scholars escaping from Italian and German persecution.

Under the editorship of Edwin R. A. Seligman, Johnson became Associate Editor of the eight-volume *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* in 1929. This landmark publication with its Macmillan Company, 1930, imprint listed Max Lerner as Managing Editor and Arthur M. Schlesinger (History), Roscoe Pound (Law), John Dewey (Philosophy), Charles A. Beard (Political Science), John Maynard Keynes, and R. H. Tawney, to name but a few, as Advisory Editors.

Johnson was elected President of the American Economic Association in 1936, and in 1939, President of the American Association of Adult Education. He retired from the New School in 1945, but remained involved with the school's affairs until his death, June 7, 1971, in Upper Nyack, New York.

Charles H. Hession, in his tribute to Johnson in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of American Biography* (1995) writes:

*A multifarious man—classicist, economist, editor, novelist, short-story writer, administrator, and champion of public libraries and adult education—he was always eager for new horizons. His breadth of learning was extraordinary. “He was the last man to know everything there was to know,” said Max Lerner, “and he carried it so lightly that you never felt that you were walking in his shadow.” His colorful conversation, his wisdom, experience, and love of people revealed an unfailing humanism.*

As the Omaha World-Herald editorial of February 27, 2001 pointed out, there now sits a small bronze bust of Johnson on the desk of the New School's new president, Nebraska past-Governor and past-U.S. Senator, Bob Kerrey. The editorial writer concludes: “All-in-all, [Alvin Johnson] is a most impressive individual—and, regrettably, one whom most Nebraskans have never heard of. His legacy is well worthy of honoring. Alvin Johnson provides a fitting inspiration for Kerrey and for all other Nebraskans.”

## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- ▲ 1903, *Rent in Modern Economic Theory*
- ▲ 1909, *Introduction to Economics*
- ▲ 1914, *The Professor and the Petticoat* (Novel)
- ▲ 1919, *Stuyvesant, Ancestor, and Other People* (*New Republic* writings)
- ▲ 1936, *Spring Storms* (Novel) and *A Touch of Colors and Other Tales*
- ▲ 1938, *The Public Library—A People's University*
- ▲ 1946, *The Clock of History*
- ▲ 1952, *Pioneer's Progress* (Autobiography)
- ▲ 1965, *New World for Old.* ▲

## Review: Unsigned

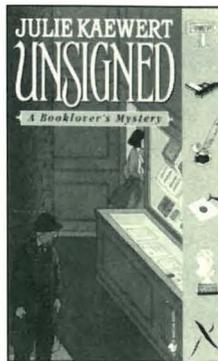
by Julie Wallin  
Kaewert  
Bantam Books  
(Random House);  
ISBN:  
0553582194;  
Jan. 2001;  
paperback

Reviewed by  
Oliver B.  
Pollak

*Unsigned* was preceded by *Unsolicited*, *Unbound*, *Unprintable*, and *Untitled*. *Unsigned* is slated to be followed by *Uncatalogued*. Kaewert is a master of bibliomystery. She is the only author that my wife Karen and I have both read completely, and await her next publication.

All stories are set around the publisher Alex Plumtree, of Plumtree Press, and his elusive love, Sarah. Thus far, she has placed Plumtree as an unsuspecting white knight in the thick of contemporary plots including kidnapping and child selling, anti-monarchy, anti-Common Market, and anti-Iraq movements.

Kaewert knows the publishing world on both sides of the Atlantic. Her most intimate geography is London. Bibliophile words like *colophon*, *incunabula*, *Garamond*, and *boards* can make for spine-thrilling and hair-raising reading. My wife finds



it hard to put these books down, and the nightstand reading lamp may still be on at 2 A.M.

*Unsigned* falls into the category of mergers and acquisitions, hostile and subversive takeovers, as the British publishing scene is threatened by the likes of Time Warner and Bertelsmann.

The CIA and M5 play a role. More I cannot say, without revealing the secret information found in this delightful bibliomystery.

**Note:** Mary Jo Ryan recently interviewed Julie Kaewert, a former Nebraskan now living in Colorado, for the KZUM radio show, *Booktalk*. For a tape of the interview, contact Mary Jo Ryan, Communications Coordinator, Nebraska Library Commission, 1200 N St., Suite 120, Lincoln NE, 68508-2023, 402-471-3434, 800-307-2665, e-mail: <mjryan@nlc.state.ne.us>. ▲

## Review: Mari Sandoz's Native Nebraska: The Plains Indian Country

by LaVerne  
Harrell Clark  
Arcadia; ISBN:  
0738507849;  
Nov. 1000;  
paperback

Reviewed by  
Christine  
Pappas

Mari Sandoz was a "major interpreter of her homeland," according to LaVerne Harrell Clark, author of *Mari Sandoz's Native Nebraska: The Plains Indian Country*. Arcadia Press recently published this book in soft cover. It is short, with just 128 pages, but its 233 annotated photos of the life and literary career of Mari Sandoz make it a unique addition to any library. The book's appearance comes at an important time in Sandoz studies because of the opening of the Mari Sandoz High Plains Center on the campus of Chadron State College.

Clark's book is truly one of a kind. It is essentially a biography of Sandoz, a history of the Native Americans in her region of the Sandhills, and a photo album of the scenes in Sandoz's books all rolled into one volume. As Clark explains in her introduction, a map of Sandoz's landscape is particularly important to a deeper understanding of her words. When Sandoz researched a book, she took the manuscript to its locale and read it on the scene, retracing the terrain. To know the land is to know Sandoz's words.

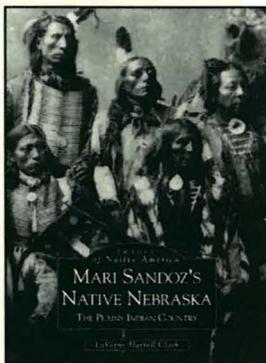
In a telephone interview from her home in Smithville TX, LaVerne Harrell Clark explained to me how well qualified she is to write a book about Mari Sandoz. Sandoz was impressed by Clark's first book *They Sang for Horses*, about the Navajo and Apache. Unfortunately, the two authors were never able to meet. Sandoz died of breast cancer in 1966, the same year *They Sang for Horses* was published. Clark won

the University of Chicago Folklore Prize in 1967 for that book, to be republished with new photographs this year by the University of Colorado Press.

In later years, Clark came to know Sandoz's sister Caroline Sandoz Pifer, who served as Sandoz's literary executor. Pifer's intimate knowledge of the sites depicted in her sister's writing, especially in *Crazy Horse* and *Cheyenne Autumn*, provides key information to this book. She also introduced Clark to Native Americans whom Sandoz had known and showed her around Fort Robinson and the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Mari Sandoz was born near Hay Springs in 1896. She was a "friend to the Indians," as her bust in the Nebraska Hall of Fame reads. Clark captures Sandoz's empathy with dozens of photos, as well as detailed descriptions of incidences in Native American history, which Sandoz recounted in her books.

Nebraskans will enjoy the photos—both new and historical—of sites in Lincoln that Sandoz frequented, including the Nebraska State Historical Society, the Capitol, and the University of Nebraska buildings. Although one might wish for scenes from her New York life, this book admittedly focuses on Sandoz's Nebraska experiences. However, this book is a "must" for the modern reader of Mari Sandoz seeking to truly understand her Western roots. ▲



## Student Letter Writers Excel

by **Diane  
Potter**

Letter writing is not an obsolete skill among Nebraska students, as the winners and alternates in the third annual Letters about Literature competition proved. Travis Johnson, a Milford Public Schools student in grade seven, wrote a letter to Jerry Spinelle about *Maniac Magee*, telling the author how the book influenced his thinking about the issues discussed in the story. His letter was judged the best in Level I for students in grades four to seven. Alternate Emily Zimmerman, a seventh grader in Fairbury Jr. High, wrote to Janet Taylor Lisle about *Afternoon of the Elves*.

Jonas Azzam, a ninth grader at Lefler Middle School in Lincoln, wrote to Philip Gourevitch about how the book *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* had an impact on his life. He is the winner in Level II for students in grades eight to twelve. The alternate is Kathryn Gutschenritten, a junior in St. Patrick High School, North Platte, who wrote her letter to Lois Lowry about *The Giver*.

This national contest, sponsored by the Library of Congress Center for the Book with the Weekly Reader Corporation, asks readers in grades four through twelve to write a letter to an author—living or



(L-R): Laureen Riedesel, Travis Johnson, Kathryn Gutschenritten, Molly Fisher, Emily Zimmerman, Rod Wagner, Jonas Azzam, and Gov. Johanns celebrate young letter writers.

dead—describing how the author's book or story somehow changed the student's way of viewing the world. The national winner receives a \$1000 award. The Nebraska Center for the Book, an affiliate of the Library of Congress Center for the Book, sponsored the statewide contest judged by Evelyn Haller, Mel Krutz, Fran Reinehr, and Mary Ann Satterfield. Travis Johnson and Jonas Azzam each received \$100 from the Weekly Reader Corporation and were entered in the national competition. The Houchen Bindery, Ltd. of Utica contributed a \$50 award to the Nebraska alternates. All winners received gift certificates from Lee Booksellers. ▲

## Seeking Nebraska's Book and Writing Groups

by **Mel Krutz**

With wonderful names like Read Around, Bookworm, Finches of the Grove, The Fish Fry Club, Chaparral, Ex Libris, Rap 'n Readers, Carcass Chompers, Prairie Trout, Quill, Morning Glories, Crazy Ladies, and Ink Dwellers, more than one hundred groups in twenty-five cities across Nebraska, from Scottsbluff to Bellevue and from north to south, have responded to the initial search of Nebraska's book and writing groups, conducted in part through this publication by the Nebraska Center for the Book (NCB). Has yours?

Among these groups, there are likely as many approaches to book discussion and writing as there are varieties of names. Nebraska is clearly rich with literary activity. On any given day, one of these groups is meeting somewhere, some time. Some have been

in existence since before 1900, continuing now into their third century—historic themselves.

NCB, an affiliate of the National Library of Congress, has as a component of its mission to act as a catalyst in bringing together Nebraska's community of the book. Under this mission, it seeks to become aware of the number of book discussion and writing groups in our state, to promote and support readers and writers statewide, and to facilitate local and statewide networking.

If your book discussion or writing group has not yet been reached, please send the name and address of a contact person to Mel Krutz, 2625 Bluff Rd., Seward, NE 68434 or e-mail: <ck34938@navix.net> before **May 30**. Specific information will be sent to your group. ▲

# Two Nebraska Poetry Readers Today

by Dick Allen

**T**wo Nebraska poets responded to NCB News reporter Dick Allen's questions in the last issue of the NCB News. He recently interviewed two avid readers of poetry: Christine Pappas (Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science, Reviewer, and Editor) and Bob Boyce (Reference and Periodicals Librarian) express their views on poets, poems, and poetry.

**Q: What is a poem?**

**CP:** Poetry, whether in a form or in blank verse, is a looser mode of expression. It frees the writer from the limitations prose writing imposes.

**BB:** "Dover Beach" is a poem. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a poem. A limerick is a poem. Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" is a poem. So is "Roses are red, Violets are blue,..." (finish it as you like). There are good poems and bad poems, just as with any kind of literature.

I suppose you could say that a poem is an expression of a thought in which the language used is especially important, as is the way in which that language—the words—is used. My old friend, *Webster's New World Dictionary*, reminds me that "poem" comes from the Greek word meaning "to make." The basic idea, then, is that a poem is a conscious creation, not just ordinary speech.

**Q: What is important about a poem?**

**CP:** Two things, I think: Poems are open to the interpretation of the reader. Also, my favorite poems are full of raw emotional energy.

**BB:** I think my comment about the importance of the language use, and the way it's used, answers your second question. That means, too, that a poem cannot be translated. A translator can create another poem, in another language, basing it on the first poem, but cannot capture all of the original. A translation of an article or report can capture the essence of that article, but not of a poem.

**Q: Does knowing who wrote the poem make a difference in the way you react to it?**

**CP:** Yes and no. I would never say "If Robert Frost wrote it, it must be good!" However, knowing the background of a poet provides so much more meaning. So normally, I want to know who the poet is, but I'm not dazzled by a famous name.

**BB:** No, I don't judge things—poems or paintings or music—by who created them. There's an old saying, "Even Homer nodded," meaning that even the great ones could produce ordinary works.

**Q: What are your favorite kinds of poetry?**

**CP:** First of all, I should say that my appreciation for poetry stems more from what poetry says about its political context than just for the form itself. Therefore, I like poems that can be viewed as artifacts more than art. Poetry often is a mode of expression used by oppressed or minority groups and three of these groups' poetry have caught my attention: the lost generation of the World War I era, the Beat Poets, and lesbian poetry from the 1970s to current. Wilfred Owen's line from "Anthem for Doomed Youth," "What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?" better informs me of the experience of World War I than any history text. I read the Beat Poets because of their revolution against the literary canon in the 1950s and 1960s. I read lesbian poetry because it's so moving to read about the pain felt by the women in the forefront of the gay civil rights movement.

**BB:** My favorite kinds of poetry are narrative poems, story-telling poems, in verse. I will get a chance to expand on this later when you ask about my favorite poems!

**Q: Are poems written by men and by women different?**

**CP:** That's a tough question. The stereotype is that women's writing is more lovey-dovey than what men do. I don't see it that way. Men have written most of the famous love poems and the women I read are quite edgy. Like all gender-based stereotypes, judgments have to come down to the individual level.

**BB:** Of course poems written by men and women are different. Poems written by Walt Whitman differ from poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning—but they also differ from poems by Robert Browning! Is there an essential difference between those by women and by men? No, I don't think so. Each poet writes from her or his own experience, thought, or soul/inspiration/whatever, and each poet differs from every other poet. The great poets rise above their own selves and touch universal themes.



**CHRISTINE PAPPAS**

*a woman is talking to death, / though talk is cheap, and life takes a long time / to make / right.*

from "A Woman Is Talking to Death"  
by Judy Grahn  
(1974)



**BOB BOYCE:**

*My heart leaps  
up when I  
behold/A  
rainbow in the  
sky. So was it  
when my life  
began;So is it  
now I am a  
man. So be it  
when I shall  
grow old./Or let  
me die!*

from "My Heart  
Leaps Up When I  
Behold" by  
William  
Wordsworth (1807)

**Q: How do you know if a poem succeeds?**

**CP:** A poem succeeds, in my opinion, if it evokes an emotional response. Hypothetically, because there is a reader out there who may be moved by any piece, each poem has the potential to succeed. How's that for subjectivity?

**BB:** In the short term, a poem succeeds if it communicates a message, if people reading say "Yes, I've felt that way, too," or "I know what the poet means"—especially if they are moved emotionally by it. In judging whether a poem succeeds in the long term, I agree with what Samuel Johnson would say, "a poem succeeds if it appeals to numbers of people over time."

**Q: Do poems change lives?**

**CP:** Of course. If a young lesbian were to pick up a book by someone like Judy Grahn, it could give her the confidence to be herself. Many people, especially those in misunderstood groups, find strength in poetry and of course, it makes them stronger as people.

**BB:** Of course poems change lives! Funny poems bring delight. Social protest poems spur people to act. Romantic poems tell the beloved how much they mean to the lover. How many people have been spurred not to peacefully lie down and die by Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night"? Every spring when I see cherry trees in bloom, my pleasure is heightened by recalling Housman's lines "About the woodlands I will go/To see the cherry hung with snow."

We're able to express thoughts, and perhaps to actually feel emotions through poetry, which we could not put words to ourselves, but which the poet, bless her/his soul, has expressed for us—and which we feel, through empathy, as paralleling our own experience. The poet helps us make sense of our lives, and make them fuller and richer.

**Q: Who are some of your favorite poets and what are some of your favorite poems?**

**CP:** I like a great range—of the Beats I mentioned earlier, I like Diane DiPrima, Marie Ponsot, and Allen Ginsberg. Recently, I've read Wislawa Symborska, Pat Califia, and Sapphire. Of course there are also the Nebraskans. Marge Saiser's "Bones of a Very Fine Hand" moved me after my mother died. Bill Kloefkorn's "Welcome to Carlos" was good, too.

**BB:** Where to start? Shakespeare's sonnets—that's a good place, and his plays as well. Emily Dickinson, "Hope" for sure! Robert Burns, "To a Mouse." Blake, "The Tyger." Rupert Brooke, "The Great Lover." I delight in his list of all he has loved. Frost, "Death of the Hired Man" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Clough, "Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth." T.S. Eliot's "Cats" (the poems, not the musical), "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and his "Coming of the Magi." James Weldon Johnson's series of poems, "God's Trombones." The medieval "Summer Is A-Cumin in," by good old "anon." Masefield, "Sea-Fever." Elizabeth B. Browning's "How Do I Love Thee?" Also Henley's "Invictus." (I love the sound of poems, the rhythm.) A.A. Milne's "Disobedience." We're swept along by the flow of words, their rhythm and rhyme, appropriate to their message.

**Q: Why do you read poetry?**

**CP:** Frankly, I'm most likely to read a book if it's assigned to me for review. I don't generally tend to pick it up because reading poems is emotionally taxing. It's such an investment to connect with so many different pieces.

**BB:** Because it gives me pleasure. Because it helps me express my emotions, to find myself, to find joy and love and light and certitude and peace, and sometimes "help for pain." It puts things in perspective in ways other written works cannot. Poetry uses language powerfully.

**Q: Does reading poetry make you want to write some of your own?**

**CP:** No. I hate everything I write. I'd rather not sully the form.

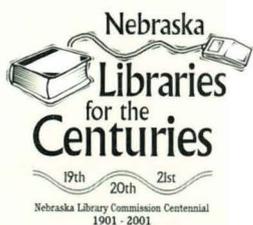
**BB:** No, I don't feel drawn to write poetry by reading it.

**Q: Can language express everything?**

**CP:** Can language convey touch? A kiss? I think not. But people's innate need to communicate will drive writers forever in pursuit of impossible tasks like this.

**BB:** Of course language can't express everything. But poetry can express more than plain old ordinary writing. ▲

# Libraries for the Centuries Celebration Begins



To celebrate our centennial year, the Nebraska Library Commission is launching the **Libraries for the Centuries** initiative. We invite library staff and supporters across Nebraska to join us as we spend 2001 celebrating our birthday. The celebration began in February with a proclamation by Governor Mike Johanns congratulating and recognizing the Nebraska Library Commission for its one hundred years of service to the State of Nebraska. Sen. DiAnna Schimek introduced a resolution in the Nebraska Unicameral commemorating the Library Commission Centennial.

A major component of the **Libraries for the Centuries** initiative is the Centennial Speaker Series. To initiate the series, Charley Seavey, Associate Professor, School of Information Resources and Library Science at the University of Arizona in Tucson, made a presentation on *Growth of the Public Library in Nebraska*. Seavey's research resulted in the development of a database with information on more than 7,500 libraries in the country, 214 of which are in Nebraska. Public libraries in Nebraska, from Ainsworth to Yutan, were the subject of his presentation, part of a reception and dinner highlighting the annual joint meeting of the Nebraska Library Commission and the State Advisory Council on Libraries. This event commemorated the date the legislation went into effect creating the Nebraska Public Library Commission, March 26, 1901. For more information see the Library Commission home page at <[www.nlc.state.ne.us](http://www.nlc.state.ne.us)>, click on Centennial.



(Above) Governor Mike Johanns (at podium) presents the proclamation to Library Commission staff, supporters, and Commissioners (right to left) Richard Miller, Nancy Busch, Rod Wagner, Wally Seiler, Kathy Tooker, Kristen Rogge, Karen Warner, Maggie Harding, Dave Oertli, and Brenda Ealey.

(Below) Sen. George Coordson (2nd from left) and Sen. DiAnna Schimek (3rd from left) present the Legislative Resolution honoring the Library Commission Centennial to NLA Executive Director Maggie Harding (left), Nebraska Library Commission Director Rod Wagner (2nd from right), and NLA President Kathy Tooker. ▲



## ▲ Geske Award Nominations Sought

The Nebraska Center for the Book invites nominations for the 2001 Jane Geske Award. The award honors Jane Geske, a founding member of the Nebraska Center for the Book and a long time active participant in Nebraska library and literary activities. The award recognizes a Nebraska association, organization, business, library, school, academic institution, or other group that has made an exceptional, long-term contribution to The Nebraska Community of the Book. Contributions should fall in one or more of the following categories: literacy, books, reading, libraries, book selling, and/or writing in Nebraska. Nominations and supporting letters must be received **by July 15** at Nebraska Center for the Book Jane Geske Award, c/o Rod Wagner, Library Commission Director, 1200 N St., Suite 120, Lincoln NE, 68508-2023, 402-471-4001, 800-307-2665, fax: 402-471-2083, e-mail: <[rwagner@nlc.state.ne.us](mailto:rwagner@nlc.state.ne.us)>. ▲

## American Readers in Paris

*continued from page 3...*

Adam Gopnick, was all the rage with his ruminating *Paris to the Moon*. Gopnick has some comments about the inhuman proportions of the new Francois Mitterand Bibliotheque Nationale, France's version of our Library of Congress. Its opening in 1998 was matched by the opening of the more human-sized, but less efficient, new British Library in 1999. While I agree with his assessment I would add these important facts: it works, it is efficient, and my computer request for ten books was honored within one hour—with one exception, an 1890 book that was burned. ▲

**Bibliofile: Featuring Barbara Leffler**By **Dick Allen**

Talking About The "Greats": An Interview with Barbara Leffler:

Barbara Leffler is moving to New England with her family in May. Her dedication and enthusiasm as a Lincoln Great Books Discussion Leader (1986–2001) will be greatly missed. Dick Allen shares some of her parting thoughts.

**Q: Barbara, what caused you to begin a Great Books Discussion Group in Lincoln?**

**A:** I started the Great Books Group because I had participated in one in East Cleveland, Ohio, near my former home. Having enjoyed that so much, I wanted to continue the experience. There was no group in Lincoln. So, I started ours.

**Q: What are the "rules" that you announce before each discussion?**

**A:** Before each discussion I list the rules: A) You must have read the selection for the meeting in order to participate in the discussion; B) We will only discuss the selection, not the other works by the same author, criticism, historical context, or anything else; C) Personal opinions should be limited to what can be borne out by the text; and D) As leader, I can only ask questions, not answer them.

**Q: What is the reason for disallowing bringing in secondary sources, other works by the same author, etc., into the discussion?**

**A:** We only want to talk about the selection and its interpretation. This is the most inclusive approach for discussion, since everyone will have read the selection. Also, the point of Great Books is to try to understand what the author has said in the work at hand. Each of us must try to derive his or her own interpretation after listening to what others in the group have said. It doesn't help us to learn to read critically if we rely on the scholarship of others.

**Q: Would you say that Great Books discussions deal primarily with ideas, with less stress on character, structure, and language?**

**A:** Yes, the ideas are the most important part of the discussion. Authors, however, convey ideas in many ways, including through character development, structure, and language.

**Q: Gertrude Stein is reputed to have said, "If you are going to discuss a 'great book' in any depth, you must do so in the original language, not in translation." Comment?**

**A:** I expect all works lose a lot in translation, even in a good translation. But I think we can still access much of the thought of the author. If the choice is between discussing only writers writing in English or reading other authors as well, albeit in translation, then it seems worthwhile to keep the non-English writers on the list.

**Q: As the discussion leader, how do you prepare for a session?**

**B:** I try to read each selection twice and carefully. I think hard and prepare several questions to help guide the group in discussion. I also try to be familiar enough with the reading so that I can help the group find relevant passages to deal with the ideas that we are discussing.

**Q: What kinds of books/readings lend themselves best to discussion?**

**A:** We look for selections that are rich in interpretation. If a work presents no questions that can be answered in at least two ways, then it will not sustain discussion.

**Q: Can you name a few titles that have led to the most productive discussion?**

**A:** Camus' *The Plague*, Moliere's *Tartuffe*, Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, Tolstoy's *Hadji Murad*, and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

**Q: Is every work/reading open to more than one interpretation?**

**A:** Many works are not open to more than one interpretation. The author makes a statement or tells a story that is clear and unambiguous. The text does not argue with itself in any way. Such a work would not sustain discussion.

**Q: What is a "great book"? Can there ever be a finite list of these? If so, would the list be constantly changing? And would the list apply only to readers in the United States?**

**A:** I think of great books as works of literature that pose deep questions about human existence, or that describe the human condition. They ask, "Who are we? What should we want? How do we live a good life?" They are books that bear reading and rereading, because they offer many insights, including ideas that are accessible only after careful, prolonged thought. They are books that you can come back to again and again, each time yielding new wisdom. They may not be your favorite books, though many of them are, but they are the most useful and intriguing.

I think the list that an individual could name as great books would be finite. As one learns of new books, one might add to it. But there are only so many books overall, and relatively few of these bear great consideration. I don't think that the list of great books is culturally or nationally bound, so that an American's list would not necessarily be appreciated only by other Americans.

**Note:** The Lincoln Great Books Program group will continue under new leadership beginning September 2001, second and fourth Thursdays, 6:45 P.M., at the Gere Library.



# The NCBNews



## Calendar of Events:



### THE NEBRASKA CENTER FOR THE BOOK

*an affiliate of the Library of Congress*

c/o Nebraska Library Commission  
The Atrium  
1200 N Street, Suite 120  
Lincoln, Nebraska 68508-2023  
34-00-00

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Lincoln, NE

### Nebraska Book Awards 2001

### An Interview with Two Poetry Readers

- Storytelling by Awele Makeba**, Sorensen Branch Library, Contact: 402-444-5274. . . . . Omaha . . . . . May 8, 12
- Diary of Anne Frank**, Lincoln Community Playhouse, Contact: 402-489-7529 . . . . . Lincoln . . . . . May 11-13, 17-20, 24-27
- Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Spring Festival**, *Willa Cather & Nature*,  
Author Mary Clearman Blew, Contact: Steve Ryan, 402-746-2653. . . . . Red Cloud . . . . . May 18, 19
- Mayhem in the Midlands**, Mystery Conference with Miriam Grace Monfredo and  
Charlaine Harris, Contact: 402-444-4828. . . . . Omaha . . . . . May 31-June 3
- Buffalo Commons Storytelling Festival**, Don Welch, John Walker, Awele Makeba, and Craig Larson  
Contact: Steve Batty, 308-345-4021. . . . . McCook . . . . . June 1, 2
- Summer Reading Club: Reading Road Trip 2001**  
Omaha Public Libraries, Elmwood Park Pavilion, Contact: Linda Trout, 402-444-4838 . . . . . Omaha . . . . . June 1
- Mari Sandoz Young Writer's Workshop**, Chadron State College, Contact: Susan Vastine, 308-432-4683. . . . . Chadron . . . . . June 3-9
- Lewis & Clark Teacher Institute**, Gary Moulton and the Humanities Council  
Contact: Pete Beeson, 402-474-2131, <beeson@alltel.net>. . . . . Lincoln . . . . . June 4-8
- Literary Heritage Award**, Mayor's Art Awards,  
Contact: Margaret Berry, 402-434-2787, <artscene@alltel.net>. . . . . Lincoln . . . . . June 6
- Storytelling Festival Kickoff**, Omaha Public Libraries, Contact: 402-444-5274. . . . . Omaha . . . . . June 20, 21
- 2001 Great Plains Chautauqua**, Behold Our New Century: Early Visions of America  
Contact: Paulette Dillon, 308-882-2234, 308-882-2211, <lamarfert@chase3000.com>. . . . . Imperial. . . . . July 6-10
- 2001 Great Plains Chautauqua**, Behold Our New Century: Early Visions of America  
Contact: Janet Jeffries, 402-826-5270, 402-826-8234 . . . . . Crete. . . . . July 13-17
- 2001 Youth Chautauqua Camp**, Contact: Sarah Brown, 402- 821-2508, <Sabrown@esu6.org> . . . . . Crete. . . . . July 13-17
- Fort Kearny Summer Writers Conference**, Contact: Charles Fort, 308-865-8164,  
<fortc@unk.edu> or Susanne George Bloomfield, 308-865-8867, <bloomfields@unk.edu>. . . . . Kearney. . . . . July 9-13
- Summer Reading Club Finale: Reading Road Trip 2001**,  
Omaha Public Libraries, Elmwood Park Pavilion, Contact: Linda Trout, 402-444-4838 . . . . . Omaha. . . . . July 26
- Story Telling OLIO**, Norfolk Public Library, Contact: Karen Drevo, 402-644-8710,  
<kdrevo@cl.norfolk.ne.us>. . . . . Norfolk. . . . . July 27
- 7th Annual Literature Festival**, Norfolk Public Library,  
Contact: Karen Drevo, 402-644-8710, <kdrevo@cl.norfolk.ne.us> . . . . . Norfolk. . . . . July 28
- Bess Streeter Aldrich Rim of the Prairie Day**, Pancake feed, parade, games, and music  
Contact: Marcee Baker, 402-994-3855, <marcee@hotmail.com> . . . . . Elmwood . . . . . August 5
- Neihardt Day**, 80th Anniversary as Nebraska Poet Laureate  
Contact: John Neihardt Center, 888-777-4667, <neihardt@gpcom.net> . . . . . Bancroft . . . . . August 5
- Nebraska Literature Festival: The Writing Life**, Peru State College  
Contact: Andy Elkins, 402-872-2418, <aelkins@oakmail.peru.edu> . . . . . Peru . . . . . Sept. 21-22
- Banned Books Week** . . . . . Nationwide. . . . . Sept. 22-29