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Librarian Of Congress Appoints UNH Professor Emeritus Charles Simic Poet Laureate

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Librarian of Congress James H. Billington has announced the appointment of Charles Simic to be the Library's 15th Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry.

Simic will take up his duties in the fall, opening the Library's annual literary series on Oct. 17 with a reading of his work. He also will be a featured speaker at the Library of Congress National Book Festival in the Poetry pavilion on Saturday, Sept. 29, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Simic succeeds Donald Hall as Poet Laureate and joins a long line of distinguished poets who have served in the position, including most recently Ted Kooser, Louise Glück, Billy Collins, Stanley Kunitz, Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass and Rita Dove. The laureate generally serves a one- or two-year term.

On making the appointment, Billington said, "The range of Charles Simic's imagination is evident in his stunning and unusual imagery. He handles language with the skill of a master craftsman, yet his poems are easily accessible, often meditative and surprising. He has given us a rich body of highly organized poetry with shades of darkness and flashes of ironic humor."

"On behalf of the entire university, I congratulate the nation's new poet laureate, UNH Professor Emeritus Charles Simic," said University of New Hampshire President Mark Huddleston. "Charlie's extraordinary achievements as a poet have been richly and appropriately recognized with numerous honors and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize and a MacArthur 'genius grant.' The UNH community has known him not only as a poet, but as an outstanding teacher for more than three decades. Now, we are privileged to share this great person with the rest of the country."

Simic is the author of 18 books of poetry. He is also an essayist, translator, editor and professor emeritus of creative writing and literature at the University of New Hampshire, where he has taught for 34 years. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1990 for his book of prose poems "The World Doesn't End" (1989). His 1996 collection "Walking the Black Cat" was a finalist for the National Book Award for Poetry. In 2005 he won the Griffin Prize for "Selected Poems: 1963-2003." Simic held a MacArthur Fellowship from 1984 to 1989.

In addition to his memoirs, titled "A Fly in the Soup" (2000), he has written essays; critical reviews; a biography on surrealist sculptor and artist Joseph Cornell, known for his collage boxes; and 13 translations from Eastern European works. Simic's own works have been widely translated.

Born in Yugoslavia on May 9, 1938, Simic arrived in the United States in 1954. He has been a U.S. citizen for 36 years and lives in Strafford, N.H.

"I am especially touched and honored to be selected because I am an immigrant boy who didn't speak English until I was 15," he said. Simic's mastery of English has made his work as appealing to the literary community as it is to the general public.

Simic's childhood was complicated by the events of World War II. He moved to Paris with his mother when he was 15; a year later, they joined his father in New York and then moved to Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago. Simic was graduated from the same high school as Ernest Hemingway. Like a previous laureate, Ted Kooser, Simic started writing poetry in high school to get the attention of girls, he has said.

Simic attended the University of Chicago, working nights in an office at the Chicago Sun Times, but was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1961 and served until 1963. He earned his bachelor's degree from New York University in 1966. From 1966 to 1974 he wrote and translated poetry, and he also worked as an editorial assistant for *Aperture*, a photography magazine. He married fashion designer Helen Dubin in 1964. They have two children.

Simic will publish a new book of poetry, "That Little Something," in Feb. 2008. His most recent poetry volume is "My Noiseless Entourage" (2005). In reviewing the tome in *Booklist*, Janet St. John wrote, "Simic's gift is his ability to unite the real with the abstract in poems that lend themselves to numerous interpretations, much like dreams. Whether using the metaphor of a dog for the self, or speaking to sunlight, Simic, original and engaging, keeps us on our toes, guessing, questioning, and looking at the world in a new way."

In another critique of "My Noiseless Entourage," Benjamin Paloff wrote in the *Boston Review* that Simic's "predilection for brief, unembellished utterances lends an air of honesty and authority to otherwise perplexing or outrageous scenes."

Simic's first collection, "What the Grass Says," (1967) was noted for its surrealist poems. Throughout his career, he has been regarded for his short, clear poems in which the words are distilled and precise. His poem "Stone" often appears in anthologies. It begins "Go inside a stone / That would be my way. / Let somebody else become a dove / Or gnash with a tiger's tooth. / I am happy to be a stone ..."

Among his earlier books, "Jackstraws" (1999) was named a Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times*. "Classic Ballroom Dances" won the 1980 di Castagnola Award and the Harriet Monroe Poetry Award, and "Charon's Cosmology" was a National Book Award for Poetry finalist in 1978. He has also received the Edgar Allan Poe Award, the PEN Translation Prize and awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 2000. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Background of the Laureateship

The Library keeps to a minimum the specific duties required of the Poet Laureate in order to permit incumbents to work on their own projects while at the Library. Each brings a new emphasis to the position. Allen Tate (1943-44), for example, served as editor of the Library's publication of that period, *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, during his tenure

and edited the compilation "Sixty American Poets, 1896-1944." Some consultants have suggested and chaired literary festivals and conferences; others have spoken in a number of schools and universities and received the public in the Poetry Room.

Increasingly in recent years, the incumbents have sought to find new ways to broaden the role of poetry in our national life. Maxine Kumin initiated a popular women's series of poetry workshops at the Library's Poetry and Literature Center. Gwendolyn Brooks met with groups of elementary school children to encourage them to write poetry. Howard Nemerov conducted seminars at the Library for high school English classes. Most incumbents have furthered the development of the Library's Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature. Joseph Brodsky initiated the idea of providing poetry in public places—supermarkets, hotels, airports and hospitals.

Rita Dove brought a program of poetry and jazz to the Library's literary series, along with a reading by young Crow Indian poets and a two-day conference titled "Oil on the Waters: The Black Diaspora," featuring panel discussions, readings and music.

Robert Hass sponsored a major conference on nature writing called "Watershed," which continues today as a national poetry competition for elementary and high school students, titled "River of Words." Robert Pinsky initiated his Favorite Poem Project, which energized a nation of poetry readers to share their favorite poems in readings across the country and in audio and video recordings. Billy Collins instituted the Web site Poetry180 (www.loc.gov/poetry/180), designed to bring a poem a day into high school classrooms. Most recently, Ted Kooser created a free weekly newspaper column (www.americanlifeinpoetry.org) that features a brief poem by a contemporary American poet and an introduction to the poem by Kooser. Donald Hall participated in the first-ever joint poetry readings of the U.S. Poet Laureate and British Poet Laureate Andrew Motion in a program called "Poetry Across the Atlantic," also sponsored by the Poetry Foundation.

Consultants in Poetry and Poets Laureate Consultants in Poetry and their terms of service are listed below.

Joseph Auslander, 1937-1941

Allen Tate, 1943-1944

Robert Penn Warren, 1944-1945

Louise Bogan, 1945-1946

Karl Shapiro, 1946-1947

Robert Lowell, 1947-1948

Leonie Adams, 1948-1949

Elizabeth Bishop, 1949-1950

Conrad Aiken, 1950-1952, First to serve two terms William Carlos Williams, Appointed in 1952 but did not serve Randall Jarrell, 1956-1958 Robert Frost, 1958-1959 Richard Eberhart, 1959-1961 Louis Untermeyer, 1961-1963 Howard Nemerov, 1963-1964 Reed Whittemore, 1964-1965 Stephen Spender, 1965-1966 James Dickey, 1966-1968 William Jay Smith, 1968-1970 William Stafford, 1970-1971 Josephine Jacobsen, 1971-1973 Daniel Hoffman, 1973-1974 Stanley Kunitz, 1974-1976 Robert Hayden, 1976-1978 William Meredith, 1978-1980 Maxine Kumin, 1981-1982 Anthony Hecht, 1982-1984 Robert Fitzgerald, 1984-1985, Appointed and served in a health-limited capacity, but did not come to the Library of Congress Reed Whittemore, 1984-1985, Interim Consultant in Poetry Gwendolyn Brooks, 1985-1986 Robert Penn Warren, 1986-1987, First to be Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry Richard Wilbur, 1987-1988 Howard Nemerov, 1988-1990 Mark Strand, 1990-1991 Joseph Brodsky, 1991-1992

Mona Van Duyn, 1992-1993 Rita Dove, 1993-1995 Robert Hass, 1995-1997 Robert Pinsky, 1997-2000 Stanley Kunitz, 2000-2001 Billy Collins, 2001-2003 Louise Glück, 2003-2004 Ted Kooser, 2004-2006 Donald Hall, 2006-2007

The annual poetry and literature reading series at the Library of Congress is the oldest in the Washington area and among the oldest in the United States. These readings, lectures, symposia and occasional dramatic performances began in the 1940s and were designed to bring good literature to a larger audience. The events are free and have been largely supported since 1951 by a gift from the late Gertrude Clarke Whittall.

The Poetry and Literature Center administers the series and is the home of the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, a position that has existed since 1936, when the late Archer M. Huntington endowed the Chair of Poetry at the Library of Congress. Since then, many of the nation's most eminent poets have served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress and, after the passage of Public Law 99-194 (Dec. 20, 1985), as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. The Poet Laureate suggests authors to read in the literary series and plans other special literary events during the reading season.

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