



## **The History of National Poetry Month in Canada**

By Andrea Thompson

The idea to create a month dedicated to reading, writing, speaking and promoting poetry in North America began in the US, when the Academy of American Poets created the first annual National Poetry Month in 1996. Fueled by a desire to help inspire people of all ages to explore this passionate art form the Academy chose April; the beginning of the season of rebirth and renewal.

Two years later, National Poetry Month came to Canada by way of the efforts of the League of Canadian Poets. Like their American counterparts, the League hoped to help bring poetry into the lives of everyday people, through public events, youth initiatives, media promotion, and cooperative efforts with schools and other community organizations.

National Poetry Month is one of many methods the League of Canadian Poets uses to try to improve the audience for poetry in this country. A non-profit arts service organization, the League is the national association of professional publishing and performing poets in Canada.

Founded in 1966, by a group of five poets, the League was formed to enhance the status of poets and to nurture a professional poetic community, to facilitate the teaching of Canadian poetry at all levels of education and to develop the audience for poetry by encouraging publication, performance and recognition of Canadian poetry nationally and internationally. Today, the League serves over 700 members whose work reflects Canada's regional and cultural diversity.

To ensure that word of National Poetry Month is heard coast to coast, the League sponsors readings and performances across the country. Events have taken place in bookstores and libraries, as well as venues as unusual as taxi cabs and a local zoo. The League has also sponsored collaborations between poets and other artists, and has promoted the cross-pollination of poetry in cities and rural areas alike.

Youth are a big part of the National Poetry Month promotions at the League, with programs to fund poets' visits to classrooms across Canada, and a free NPM poster distribution program to school libraries to help spread the word. The League also offers youth interactive programs, mentorship and poetry teaching tools available on the website: [www.youngpoets.ca](http://www.youngpoets.ca), and has partnered with organizations such as the National Film Board of Canada, and CBC Radio to offer youth unique, and unforgettable poetry experiences.

This year marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of National Poetry month in Canada, and looking back, it's clear that poetry has become a more prominent part of Canadian life. One victory for the verse is the re-instatement of the official government positions of Poet Laureate. This move on behalf of municipal, provincial and federal governments underscores the importance of the poet as a literary ambassador to the larger community. The following are some

reflections from a handful of Canada's current Poets Laureate on why National Poetry Month has become one of the world's largest literary celebrations.

### **Poetry to the Rescue:**

#### ***John Steffler, Parliamentary Poet Laureate***

We live inside language, shape and share ourselves with it and use it to handle the surrounding world. In an atmosphere of job-talk, technical jargon, sales pitches, sound bites, bureaucratese and grocery-store chitchat we get mental asthma, we shrink to anaemic fragments. Poetry, with its fireman's axe, comes to the rescue, opening doors and windows we'd forgotten we had, reviving words slumped in heaps in the basement of our mind, and those resuscitated words are oxygen in our blood. How good it feels to have depths and energy, to share in the hungers and insights poetry radiates. Poetry is language fully alive, excited language, which conveys and generates an excited experience of life.

#### ***Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, Toronto Poet Laureate***

National Poetry Month is the wake-up call to Canadians to look at the poetry in their lives, on their pages, in their various schemes for a better quality of life. You cannot build a good future without the ideals and grace of poetry. In a world that screams prosperity and wealth generation, the poets remind us that human cities are the only cities worth having. Poetry is a way of life, a way of respecting your creativity as a citizen. It's the most precious thing we have. Life is drudgery without it.

#### ***David Helwig, PEI Poet Laureate***

Pushing clocks on the timeless: that's how my friend Tom Marshall once described the comic character Sam Slick. I suppose it's what we do in trying to increase public awareness of poetry, which aspires always to be timeless, perhaps to exist in some parallel world of resonant, perfected language. And yet. Does the tree fall if no-one sees it? Does the poem exist if no one reads it? The answer is always Yes, but . . . So we go on saying, Look, Listen, Stop here for a moment. Someone is talking to you.

#### ***Liz Zetlin, Owen Sound Poet Laureate***

During National Poetry Month, I celebrate two favorite things – the planting of snow peas and the seeding of poetry. Though as poet laureate, my goal is to make every month poetry month. To make poetry the fourth “P” (standing in for all the arts) in my community's infrastructure along with pipes, pavement and police. That's a year round job, with NPM being a good focus, because people say, “Oh yeah, I heard about that on the radio.” Suddenly a month for poetry (the shortest distance between two hearts) seems as important as Heart and Stroke Month.

#### ***George McWhirter, Vancouver Poet Laureate***

When I was small and spoiled, I would ask my father, “When's my birthday?” And he'd say, “With what you get, every day's a birthday. Think about those not so lucky as you.” Same with poetry, surrounded by it—reading work by new League or UBC Creative Writing poets, being involved in Vancouver poetry events, by editing *A Verse Map of Vancouver*—every day is a verse birthday for me, but for those, not so lucky Canadians, for one month, they get to share the good fortune and gift of poetry with those who write and love it year round.

To join in the festivities, click on [www.poets.ca](http://www.poets.ca) to see what's happening in your own backyard.