

Narrative Poetry: Contemporary Poets Summoning Stories (Part 1)
Friday, March 6 | 3:00-4:30PM

John Blair has published six books, the most recent of which is *Playful Song Called Beautiful* (U. of Iowa Press, 2016), which won the Iowa Poetry Prize. His seventh book is coming out later this year from Measure Press.

Dr. Lisa Pertillar Brevard is Core Faculty and Associate Director of the Center for General Education at Walden University. Her projects include the Peabody Award-winning Smithsonian/NPR series "*Wade in the Water*": *African American Sacred Music Traditions*. A biographer, songwriter, and poet, her biographies include: *Whoopi Goldberg on Stage and Screen*; *Emma Azalia Smith Hackley (1867-1922), Classical Singer-Activist*; and *Edwin Henry Hackley (1859-1940), Attorney-Activist*. A member of ASCAP, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers, Dr. Brevard has offered workshops on lyricism and marketing at Tinker Mountain Writers. Brevard's poetry collections include: *Louisiana Dawn: Poems of a Grafted Life*; *In Praise of Ancestors*; and, with her husband Frank Brevard, *Beautiful Remains: Words and Pictures Rescued from Hurricane Katrina*. She lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Erika Dreifus is the author of *Birthright: Poems*, published by Kelsay Books in fall 2019. She is also the author of *Quiet Americans: Stories*, a short-story collection that is largely inspired by the histories and experiences of her paternal grandparents, German Jews who escaped Nazi persecution and immigrated to the United States in the late 1930s. Erika earned undergraduate and graduate degrees from Harvard University, where she taught history, literature, and writing for several years. A fellow in the Sami Rohr Jewish Literary Institute and adjunct assistant professor at Baruch College of The City University of New York, she writes and lectures widely. Since 2004, Erika has published *The Practicing Writer*, a free (and popular) e-newsletter for writers of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. She lives in New York City.

A.W. Strouse is a poet who grew up in Appalachian Pennsylvania and who, at the age of 18, made the traditional, gay escape to New York City, where Strouse now lives and works as a part-time professor of medieval studies. Strouse has published on medieval poetics in many articles and in a forthcoming monograph about the aesthetics of circumcision, *Form and Foreskin*. Strouse is also the author of several books of poetry, including, most recently, *Gender Trouble Couplets, Volume 1*, which (inspired by thirteenth-century rhyming encyclopedias) rewrites Judith Butler into rhyme. The study of medieval linguistics also has prompted Strouse's call (in a series of essays for *Inside Higher Education*) for the abolition of the formal indoctrination of standard English grammar. And medieval literary culture has heightened Strouse's enthusiasm for creating non-textual and/or non-literary literatures: Strouse's current work-in-progress is a performance-art piece known as "The Gobblers," which draws upon the formal strategies of medieval narrative verse, the American folk lyric, post-modern experimental cinema, and gay camp.

Erika Dreifus's session remarks, as prepared for delivery:

I'm predisposed to narrative. I was trained as a prose writer—first as an historian, and then as a fiction writer. So perhaps it's unsurprising that my poetry falls under a “narrative” label and that this session's description drew me in, inspiring me to write to our organizer and the original chair, Jerry Wemple, about my interest in joining. I encourage you to attend the sequel to this session, with a fresh slate of poets, which Jerry himself will chair tomorrow morning at 10:15 in the Clarendon Room.

But “narrative poetry” as a genre or category isn't something I consciously strove for from the outset. Perhaps this is a good moment to mention that I didn't consciously strive for *anything* from the outset. I did not embark on an epic project or a novel-in-verse. I simply began writing poems and, after about a decade, I realized that I had a book on my hands, a book that was published last November as *Birthright*.

So, again, the narrative tendencies that dominate the 54 poems in *Birthright* may have been instinctive, and they may now be obvious, but they weren't planned. It wasn't until I read an early endorsement of my collection that I perceived the book in quite the terms that my “blurber” did when she generously wrote that it was a “welcome addition to the modern American poetry canon—narrative, Jewish, feminist, or otherwise.”

I blame my cluelessness on my roots in prose writing. Over the years, I've developed strong feelings about fact and fiction; I've often chosen sides in prose writing's genre wars. But I'm far less fluent in the arguments of poetic tribes and the stakes of their quarrels and concerns. Because, to be truthful, even now, I'm less schooled in poetry itself.

One review of *Birthright* begins by noting its position as a poetry book that follows an earlier short-story collection and continues by teasing out this narrative connection: “The poems in *Birthright*,” says this reviewer, “often feel like stories in miniature, replete with setting, character, dialogue, and plot, across a wide variety of registers and contexts, ranging from biblical to personal, familiar to historical, literary to political. Poems that draw from biblical stories are interspersed with personal stories, which productively complicates both types of poems.” So that's nice. And it helps introduce my book to you.

But the reviewer also issues a cautionary note, finding that the “fiction-writing sensibility is both a strength and a weakness.” Perhaps the most serious flaw the critic discerns is my failure to “engage...thoroughly” with certain “poetic tools.” She concludes the review with a spotlight on her favorite poem in the book. It is not one that I would consider to be a narrative poem. Here, the reviewer says, I've written something “that takes full advantage of some of the opportunities that poetry offers: freedom from grammatical constraint and close attention to pattern, repetition, and sound....This poem's wonderful mishmash of registers shows Dreifus at her most powerfully resonant.”

Alas, that's not one of the poems that I've planned to read for you—for me, it doesn't “summon stories” or merit the “narrative poetry” label.

So I'm afraid that as I read for you, you may not find me at my most powerfully resonant. You may not find a wonderful mishmash of registers. But I hope that you'll find some coherent stories.

The stories that my poems summon vary. Some are autobiographical and confessional vignettes. Others take what is often called a midrashic approach, revisiting sacred or biblical tales, often filling in gaps in the official plot or giving voice to marginalized characters. Some of my poems narrate historical or recent news events. And still others fuse family history with current experience. I'll give you a brief sampling of all of these.

And if you still want to hear the critic's favorite—it's a short one—I'll be happy to oblige in Q&A.

Followed by readings of these poems:

- "Umbilicus"
- "Vocabulary Lesson, 1977"
- "The Awakening"
- "Complicity"
- "Ode to a Rescuer"
- "Diaspora: A Prose Poem"

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