

George Ella Lyon Named Kentucky Poet Laureate

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By [PAUL HITCHCOCK](#)

Gov. Steve Beshear has appointed Lexington poet, author, lyricist and teacher George Ella Lyon as Kentucky poet laureate for 2015-16, the Kentucky Arts Council announced on Friday (March 13). Lyon, a native of Harlan, will be formally inducted during a ceremony on Kentucky Writers' Day, April 24, at the Capitol Rotunda in Frankfort.

Lyon is a graduate of Centre College, and holds a Master of Arts in English from the University of Arkansas and doctorate in English from Indiana University.

She has taught creative writing at Centre College, where she was twice a writer-in-residence; Transylvania University and the University of Kentucky; and has been a visiting writer in Master of Fine Arts programs at Vermont College, Spalding University, Murray State University and Appalachian State University.

She works in 30 to 40 schools a year as a visiting author and is a frequent workshop leader for National Writing Project affiliates.

"From her immense collection of poetry to her work as a teacher, George Ella Lyon's work is a portrait of Kentucky heritage and tradition," said Gov. Beshear.

"The Commonwealth is fortunate to have a writer like George Ella Lyon living and teaching within our borders, and I am proud to name her the Commonwealth's next poet laureate," added Beshear.

Lyon said part of her mission during her tenure as poet laureate will be to continue to make poetry accessible to the general population.

"I'm always trying to help people hear their own voices, their own stories and know that those matter; that they have weight and beauty and that they are worth sharing," she said.

"Part of that is listening deeply to what people write or the questions they ask. Many people are afraid of poetry because they don't understand it. I hope to reach past that and welcome them, and that they infuse poetry into their everyday language and hear the poetry in their everyday speech," added Lyon.



George Ella Lyon
Credit Kentucky.com

The experience of growing up in Harlan surrounded by extended family and their stories helped Lyon develop her voice as a writer. She has never forsaken her Appalachian roots, which figure prominently in much of her work. Lyon has written more than 40 books, including the poetry collections "Mountain," which won the Lamont Hall Award in 1983, and "Catalpa," which was named Appalachian Book of the Year in 1993.

Her collections also include "She Let Herself Go" and "Many-Storyed House;" and the poem "Where I'm From," which was featured on the PBS program "The United States of Poetry" and has been used around the world as a writing model for poetry.

The Kentucky poet laureate promotes the literary arts in Kentucky through readings of her work at meetings, seminars and conferences across the state. Since 1995, the position has been appointed by the governor and is coordinated by the state arts agency. Lyon succeeds poet laureate Frank X Walker, who was appointed in 2013.

Lyon says poetry is her principal discipline. "Words amaze me," she writes on her website, www.georgeallyon.com. Her father, a dry cleaner, read poems aloud and sang to Lyon when she was a child. Her mother played imagination games with her. In third grade, Lyon started writing poems on her own, in addition to studying piano, voice and flute. When folk music became popular, she applied her talent to writing folk lyrics.

"George Ella Lyon's poetic voice is one we are excited to celebrate in Kentucky," said Lori Meadows, arts council executive director.

"She has made her mark in Kentucky and in the national poetry community. We at the arts council look forward to what her tenure as Kentucky poet laureate brings to the Commonwealth," added Meadows.

Lyon's work has received many awards, including the American Library Association's Schneider Family Book Award, a Jane Addams Honor, a Golden Kite and the Bluegrass Award.

Though Lyon now resides in Lexington, her output is frequently steeped in her Harlan County upbringing.

As one "Booklist" reviewer wrote of her novel "With a Hammer for My Heart"...

"Lyon gives readers a story rich in precise, gorgeous language that glows like a sword on the forge and cuts as deep...Tragedies old and new weave a tiny Kentucky town into the center of the universe."

The Kentucky Arts Council, the state arts agency, fosters environments for Kentuckians to value, participate in and benefit from the arts. Kentucky Arts Council funding is provided by the Kentucky General Assembly and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The arts council, along with the NEA, celebrates 50 years of service in 2015, which the arts council is recognizing as the Year of the Arts in Kentucky.

(story provided by Kentucky Arts Council)