

Another poet laureate, and another focus on Fresno's vibrant poetry scene

By Donald Munro
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Somehow, between the constantly ringing phone and the TV news crews crowding into his home office and the Library of Congress pestering him to stick to his interview schedule, Juan Felipe Herrera on Wednesday afternoon remembered something very important.

The doorbell rang at his Fresno house. Herrera leaped up from his dining-room table and called out to his wife, the performance artist and poet Margarita Robles, "That's for you." When she opened the door, a delivery man handed her a vase of flowers and box of chocolates. "Happy birthday!" Herrera said, beaming.

What a day: Not only was the Fowler native named the next poet laureate of the United States by the Library of Congress, he also managed to score a few husband points.

The former Fresno State professor, who taught in the university's Chicano and Latin American Studies Department from 1990 to 2004, on Wednesday received a flurry of national attention. From the New York Times (which was given advance notice of the honor) to the PBS NewsHour (which, likewise, also learned early of his appointment, spending a day and a half filming a segment that aired on Wednesday night), Herrera's name was all over the news.

That's standard practice for the honor. But with his appointment, there is another superlative that makes the story groundbreaking: Herrera will be the first Latino U.S. poet laureate in history.

And on a local level, adding to the excitement on Wednesday was the fact that he is the second former Fresno State professor in just four years to be named U.S. poet laureate. The late Philip Levine was named to the one-year post in 2011.

"It's huge for the university," said Fresno State Provost Lynnette Zelezny. "We're really honored — I would say elated — to be recognized."

Zelezny noted that "we're in a location that really does foster and breathe this kind of raw artistic expression. The environment that we have here in the Central Valley makes this a real epicenter of artistic creativity."

Herrera, 66, remembered that when he came to Fresno State in 1990, he was immediately reminded of the university's poetry pedigree.

"When I first got here, on Day 1, I entered the Chicano Studies Department, and Philip Levine was waiting for me to greet me and welcome me to the campus," he said. "I found that to be incredible."

The poetry of Herrera, the son of migrant farmworkers who moved about the state, is steeped in the Chicano contours of California, from the fields of the San Joaquin Valley and San Diego to the bustling artistic energy of Los Angeles and San Francisco.

"Just like my parents immigrated from ranch to ranch picking crops, I have migrated from city to city," he said.

He served as California poet laureate from 2012 to 2015.

His poetry has a zeal and an energy that can feel raw and electric. His view: If you want to write in English, do it. If you want to write in Spanish — or Hmong or any other language spoken in this vast country — do it. Sometimes he writes

in both. From his poem “Blood on the Wheel”:

Blood in the tin, in the coffee bean, in the maquila oración

Blood in the language, in the wise text of the market sausage

Blood in the border web, the penal colony shed, in the bilingual yard ...

In announcing Herrera’s appointment, Librarian of Congress James H. Billington noted: “I see in Herrera’s poems the work of an American original—work that takes the sublimity and largesse of ‘Leaves of Grass’ and expands upon it. His poems engage in a serious sense of play — in language and in image — that I feel gives them enduring power.”

There have been national poet laureates since 1986, which makes Herrera — who will officially take over for current poet laureate Charles Wright in September — the 21st to hold the title. Before that the position, created in 1937, was known as the consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress.

The Latino angle was a part of every interview on Wednesday, of course, though the vocabulary varied depended on the publication. “Chicano, Latino, Hispanic — I’m good with all that,” Herrera said.

Asked which designation he preferred, he leans toward being known as the first Latino poet laureate, “though what I’d really like is ‘21st human being,’” he said with a laugh.

The poet laureate official duties, which come with a \$35,000 stipend, are light. Herrera still hasn’t formulated his plans, but he hopes to proselytize for poetry under a banner he terms “*Casa de Colores*.” Which means everybody, he said.

Victor Torres, a longtime colleague in the Chicano and Latin American Studies Department at Fresno State, said that the appointment of a Latino poet laureate is important for the country.

“I think it’s long overdue, given the changing demographics in the United States, particularly in California,” he said.

For Torres, the honor reflects well on a department that continues to be absolutely vital to the university, he said.

“He came in as one of our own. He developed his craft when he was at Fresno State. I think it’s significant for us that some of that prestige can rub off on us.”

After Fresno State, Herrera took a creative writing faculty position at the University of California at Riverside, where he taught until this year, but he always had roots in Fresno. He retired this year and lives here again.

To label Herrera simply as a poet is to miss the wider scope of his creativity. He started out less as an artist and more as a social scientist, graduating in 1972 from UCLA with a bachelor’s degree in social anthropology and then attending Stanford University, where he received a master’s degree in social anthropology.

In 1990 he received a Master’s of Fine Arts at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, and by the time he got to Fresno State, his artistic side was exploding. He is a cartoonist, novelist, poet, playwright and performance artist.

“But if I can only be known as one thing, then, well, I guess it would be poet and performer and teacher,” he said, smiling, ignoring that’s actually three things.

By this time on Wednesday afternoon, he has stopped answering his phone and ignored his overflowing email inbox. There are things like the local paper, and his wife’s birthday, to focus on.

His poetry is built upon the work of others, Herrera said, and his thank-yous are expansive. “I’m very grateful to all the people of Fresno, to Philip Levine and all the poets before me, and all the farmworkers,” he said. “I didn’t get here by myself.”

As a professor at Fresno State, Herrera was the most popular teacher in the department, Torres said. Students

crammed into his courses.

For him, there's a poetic line from one generation to the next.

What advice would he give to young poets?

He thinks for a moment. "Here is what I would say: I am one of you. You are one of me. We are family. *Somos familia*. Poetry is what keeps the family alive."

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Let Me Tell You What a Poem Brings

for Charles Fishman

Before you go further,

let me tell you what a poem brings,

first, you must know the secret, there is no poem

to speak of, it is a way to attain a life without boundaries,

yes, it is that easy, a poem, imagine me telling you this,

instead of going day by day against the razors, well,

the judgments, all the tick-tock bronze, a leather jacket

sizing you up, the fashion mall, for example, from

the outside you think you are being entertained,

when you enter, things change, you get caught by surprise,

your mouth goes sour, you get thirsty, your legs grow cold

standing still in the middle of a storm, a poem, of course,

is always open for business too, except, as you can see,

it isn't exactly business that pulls your spirit into

the alarming waters, there you can bathe, you can play,

you can even join in on the gossip — the mist, that is,

the mist becomes central to your existence.

Excerpted from "Half of the World in Light: New and Selected Poems by Juan Felipe Herrera," 2008