

Arts and Features

The varied voices of 'Living Poets Societies'

By D'ANN PLETCHER

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The recent movie "Dead Poets Society" had an interesting theme. It suggested that the poetry of dead poets has more to do with going for the girl, going for the part in a play, and with general *carpe diem*-ish activities than with any musty tome of criticism you might find in the card catalog of Davis Library.

This got me thinking. If the poetry of dead poets is that hip, what kind of devilish activities might the poetry of living poets inspire? The possibilities seemed limitless.

But how does one go about finding a living poet? Advertise in the Daily Tar Heel?

Luckily, my oracle, (who doubles as an editor at the DTH), had heard of a group called Friday Noon Poets who meet regularly on campus. I decided

to check it out.

I was a little nervous about just walking in on their meeting. They might think I was a poet or something. When I got there, my suspicions were confirmed.

"We've been expecting you," said one man who looked like my former Introduction to Poetry professor, with his oversized-round glasses and balding head.

"It's about time you showed up," said another man, who looked about 15 years younger and more like a retail clerk than a college professor.

"You must be mistaken, I'm not a poet. I'm just a reporter from the Daily Tar Heel," I embarrassedly replied. Maybe I should have gone along with it. After all, there was that rhyming Thanksgiving Day prayer I wrote in fourth grade.

"No, it's you we were expecting,"

said the first man. "We knew you'd show up sooner or later."

I didn't have time to wonder about whether or not they thought I was someone else, because the first man began reciting a poem.

At first I thought he was just talking to me, because he wasn't reading from a manuscript and he was looking directly at me as he spoke.

But soon the words he spoke gave me a different feeling than everyday conversation or even other poems I had read. The questions he asked and the scenes and emotions he described made me remember some of my own emotions and experiences.

I realized that the reason I had never felt this way about the poems in Poetry 101 was that the voice behind poetry had been missing. The intellectual exercise had been there; I had read the poems over and over until I under-

stood them well enough to write an essay, and I even memorized some of the lines. But this experience was different.

This time the guy who wrote the stuff was actually in front of me, reading the lines as though they had occurred to him for the very first time. I never knew poetry could be this fresh, this alive. It reminded me of the first time I saw a live theatrical performance.

It turned out that this poet had lost his only son to suicide several years ago. He released his grief through his poetry. Though he later told me this, he didn't have to. It was there in the poetry, both the grief and the release.

After all the poets had read several of their poems, I asked them what they felt the best things were that poetry has to offer the reader and the listener. "With poetry, you are sharpening

your own experience, helping yourself to be aware," said another poet.

"You are racing against yourself," said another.

A third poet offered some practical advice that I found encouraging. She said: "There is nothing wrong with not liking a poem. Not all poems are for everyone. If you find one you don't like, don't give up. There will be another one that you can relate to."

Paul Jones, another local poet and organizer of poetry readings sponsored by the ArtsCenter and currently held at The Hardback Cafe, said that poetry embodies the type of teaching theory of "think and learn for yourself" that Dead Poets Society was all about.

"Poets are trying with all their might to get to the truth. When you attend a poetry reading, you are keeping the visionary company. On the other hand, literature as you are taught in school is

removed—two or three times."

And the visionaries we in Chapel Hill have the opportunity to keep company with aren't too shabby.

Jones said many of the poets who have read at the Hardback have gone on to win such prestigious poetry awards as inclusion in the Yale Younger Poets Series, the North Carolina Arts Council fellowship, and the MacArthur fellowship.

Marsha Warren, director of the North Carolina Writer's Network, whose headquarters are in Chapel Hill, said the Research Triangle area has hundreds of resident poets, the most dense poet population in North Carolina.

There are also many places to hear local poets read: The Hardback Cafe, the Columbia Street Coffeehouse, The Bread and Board, and The Chapel Hill Public Library, to name a few.

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