

Yoder brings theatrical flair to poetry showcase

AMANDA SIERADZKI
COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

Longtime writer and teacher Maureen Yoder caught a travel bug from her father, a former international air pilot. She's traveled far and wide to Greece, Hawaii, Panama Canal Zone, Alaska, Costa Rica, Pennsylvania, no place ranking as more exotic than the other. Yoder jokes that she loves traveling so much that even a quick jog over to Gadsden County could be considered an adventure.

Her family has lived in Japan, Germany, and Portugal, and visited numerous landscapes and countries. Travel served as her biggest inspiration as a writer. Yoder seeks an experience-driven life in order to meet people and interact with the environment, culture, and histories of any given locale. These explorations have worked their way into the settings and character developments in her creative writing, a passion that has coalesced with her travels.

"I feel like Scout in 'To Kill a Mockingbird,'" says Yoder of one of her favorite books. "I have been reading and I've been writing in school creatively since I can remember, making up stories and journaling. It's been a whole lifetime."

Her extensive travels have gifted her the chance to meet and interact with all kinds of people. She remains fascinated with the everyday person — children, neighbors, the postman, colleagues, and students all inspiring her, and their life experiences informing her stories. Growing up in Miami and earning her bachelor's degree in English from University of Central Florida, Yoder would write silly asides about tourists who find themselves sunburned and crossing paths with shady characters. Yoder continued with her master's degree in creative writing at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington.

Yoder's very first artistic pursuit was theater, where she acted in school plays and luxuriated in the scripted world onstage. Drama has continued to influence her writing process, and though she was once set on being a theater major in college, she felt called back to words and stories in a different way. She says her mother always saw her as a born teacher, equipped with her own miniature chalkboard, and able to corral her three brothers into playing school.

IF YOU GO

What: Young Poets' Showcase (part of the Summer Poetry to Last a Lifetime program)
When: 6-7:30 p.m., Friday, July 22
Where: Knott House Museum, 301 East Park Avenue
Cost: Free
Contact: For more information please call 850-922-2459 or visit www.museumoffloridahistory.com/knotthouse/.

"When I first went from drama into creative writing, I floundered a little bit and it occurred to me that I should be teaching English since I loved it so much," recalls Yoder. "I needed to stay close to the thing I loved best. I love drama, reading, writing, and language, grammar and structure of it, and what else is there but to teach it?"

Even though she hung up her official acting chops in high school, Yoder has continued to use theater principles in what she calls "artful teaching," performing English for her students. She is an instructor and founding board member of the School of Arts and Sciences, a charter school in Tallahassee. Twenty years later, she is still finding joys in fostering creativity and instilling language arts curricula in her students. For instance, when starting a unit on Greek mythology, Yoder began with the oral storytelling tradition in passing along the tales of Icarus and Orpheus. The dramatization of these stories brought them to life and allowed her class to experience the words firsthand.

Her days teaching middle school have also resulted in writing about younger characters. Yoder's in-class writing workshops are an opportunity for her to write and workshop alongside her students. Most recently she wrote a short story about a little boy named Appleton who discovers that a farm's root cellar contains magical properties and allows visitors to escape in a kind of dream-like catharsis. However, as writing facilitator, she finds the majority of her time consumed with editing her students' work, which in turn has helped improve her own vocabulary in utilizing active verbs, specific nouns, and adjective phrases.

"It's a very layered process and almost Hemingway-esque in that I go after simple words, phrases, or images in a very meticulous kind of way," explains Yoder. "Once I get that first draft down I go back because every comma, word, and phrase deserves a little bit of attention until it sounds right. I do a lot of reading out loud as well."

Her favorite story that she's written features a young mother on a tobacco farm who, in her haste to save her firstborn son from intrusive wild dogs, accidentally leaves her new baby outside in their basket. Whether her writings are based in reality or fantasy,



DAVID LURIE
A woman of many talents, Maureen Yoder has been instrumental in putting together the Young Poets showcase.

she finds drama to be a unifying concept with character-driven storylines. Yoder is five years away from her goal to publish a novel by age 60 and has notebooks filled with ideas and snippets that she hopes will emerge as a greater narrative.

Isolating her favorite book or author is a seemingly impossible task, as she's recently re-read "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" by Betty Smith, and fell in love with the science and fantasy thriller "The Martian" by Andy Weir. Given the autonomy of her charter school, she feels privileged to create her own relevant curriculum and teach in multi-age level settings. By way of language arts, she gets to know her students on a personal level through their journal writing and is rewarded with visits from former students who have blossomed into smart, capable young adults.

"It's given me such capacity to love and love big," says Yoder, who has learned patience and creativity from her students. "They've taught me how to expect everybody will be their own person and not everybody will respond to the same subject or assignment or perspective. These little budding scientists can turn a story like nobody's business because scientists have just as big an imagination as artists do."

When the school year ends, Yoder eagerly awaits the summertime where she has been the leading instructor at the Knott House's "Summer Poetry to Last a Lifetime" program for over a decade. Students of middle and high school age attend to immerse themselves in poetry workshops, readings, library scavenger hunts, and field trips around town.

Yoder was delighted when Museum Program Coordinator, Beatrice Cotellis, invited her onboard and has crafted the activities in the program since its inception. Yoder and Cotellis tag-team to incorporate the history of the house, its patron of poetry, Luella Knott, and outside musicians into the program to give the students a richer, poetic experience. Yoder delights in exposing the students to new poets, and meets challenges in engaging them to be inspired to think about writing poetry, by pulling from her bag of tricks: Balderdash or board games to do with language, making collages, and nosing around bookshelves for new poets.

"Middle school is the transformation from concrete operational thought to random abstract thought and so it's the same way with poetry," explains Yoder. "The concrete poems of Shel Silverstein translate into the more esoteric poems of Walt Whitman. That bridge is very fun to explore, and watching the kids grapple with a new way of working, reading, understanding is great fun."

Yoder seeks poems that sound good to read aloud and introduces her favorite poets like Billy Connolly, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Frost, and Denise Levertov to the students. Performing poetry in a professional-style reading is another main attribute of the program, and a tradition that both she and the students cherish. The program stretches from July 11-22 in two sessions, and culminates in the Young Poets' Showcase from 6-7:30 p.m. on Friday, July 22, at the Knott House Museum.

When the camp comes to an end, Yoder says that sharing their work and supporting one another infuses the students with pride and a sense of accomplishment. She sees the camp as a haven for students who may not get poetry in their regularly scheduled school year, and gives an outlet to convene with others over an often-neglected portion of language arts.

"There are poets out there on the fringes that need a place to grow and feel they're not alone," says Yoder. "Poets can articulate feelings, experiences, and the world around them in a language that communicates at a different level. I think that writing and poetry services the community because these artists are able to tap into that unconscious universal spirit and well that spirit up in order to reach other people in a conscious way so it connects us all."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



Working on the poetry showcase.

KNOTT HOUSE MUSEUM