

The best words in the best order

Florida Poet Laureate Peter Meinke on the craft of writing ... and the neighborhood that is his muse

By Jacki Levine

When Peter Meinke was a young boy growing up in a working class family in World War II-era Brooklyn, poetry wasn't remotely in the picture.

"Nobody read poetry. But my mother belonged to the Book of the Month Club, so that's where I read my first poems. I started very early," says Meinke.

Attracted to Edgar Allen Poe and Emily Dickinson, and drawn to mysterious lines like, "Hope is the thing with feathers/ That perches in the soul," Meinke soon tried his hand writing for a limited and captive audience. "I would write like Poe about worms to scare my sisters," he says. "I knew it was an odd thing, and for no one else. I was a closet poet."

Since then, a love of the written word has led Meinke, 86, to a career as both an acclaimed practitioner and a teacher of poetry. He's published several books of award-winning poetry, fiction, essays, and children's books, and served as a literature professor and director of the writing workshop at Eckerd College for 27 years.

And after a stint as St. Petersburg's poet laureate, he became the first Poet Laureate of Florida appointed by the governor since the Florida Legislature created the honorary, unpaid post in 2014. He completed his four-year term at the end of June.

His writing has been described by fellow poet Alica Suskin Ostriker this way: "Peter Meinke writes, it is clear, beneath a banner of wisdom."

What does it mean to be poet laureate?

I took it to mean to be kind of a Johnny Appleseed, going around the state throwing out poems in all the cities and schools, and hoping some of them catch, and the seeds would blossom.

My basic principle was I said yes to everything. I gave several hundred readings, and tried to aim my poems to wherever I went.

After any reading of any size, I would hear from people, looking for advice on their poems.

Anything you'd change about the poet laureate experience?

In the U.S., we copied the English system of poets laureate, which goes back to Chaucer. In those days, they often gave the poet laureate a barrel of sherry. I could have used that. In place of that I'd like someone to arrange the transportation and scheduling.

What was your impression of Florida when you moved to St. Petersburg in 1966, after teaching five years at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota?

I was not a fan when we moved here. I didn't like the heat, the politics, and its flatness. They still had all the green benches with these old people sitting around, and it scared the kids. The kids would complain and I'd tell them we'd be here for three years, warm up, and then go back to civilization.

How did you learn to love Florida?

One day Jeanne found a little neighborhood called Driftwood, covered with flowers and oak trees. She told me she found a magical place. It took two years to find our house. Jeanne planted azaleas. Right across from us were the big houses, a little public beach, and a path leading to the water. The whole area is historic. And that's what Florida means to us: Oak trees, azaleas.

How has living in Florida, and more specifically, in your neighborhood, impacted your poetry?

A great deal. It made me more interested in writing about nature. I've written about the ibis, the oak trees, about Lassing Park where we walk, I've written about houses. In fact, I have a poem called "Old Houses," a poem in the shape of a house.

What should poetry do?

Poetry can help our lives, make them more enjoyable. But I think it should be fun; it shouldn't be like broccoli or spinach. The more poetry we have, the better off we will be as a country.

To hear Peter Meinke read his poem, "Old Houses," please visit floridahumanities.org/blogs

What makes someone a poet versus a dabbler?

A good poem is something that is well made. For someone to learn to be a good poet and not a dabbler, they have to read a lot of poetry. It's an exercise in delayed gratification. You get an inspiration, and that's exciting. And then if you want to really make it a poem, you have to work on it. It's a long time between the original inspiration and seeing it in print.

And even if you're not going to write a sonnet or villanelle, it's a good idea to read a sonnet: to hear how poetry sounds. It's like being a conductor of an orchestra; you've got to know what's available in the music. You don't have to write a sonnet, but that will give some music to your prose poetry.

Your poems have an accessible, down-to-earth quality. How would you describe your poetry?

I try to write poems that reach out and communicate. They are not abstract. Poetry is the kind of writing that is closest to music. I write for sound.

I'm interested in writing the kind of poems someone can read and understand, but want to read again.

Why would someone want to read it twice? Every poem has to have something surprising, different. Through vocabulary,

punctuation, ideas, you make everything surprising. I try to make connections you would not pick up in the first reading.

If you want to write a good poem, you should try to write a great poem. The best words in the best order. That's good advice to any poet; I try to do that as I rewrite my poems.

Sometimes I get a poem from an image: I might see a bird — an ibis, a night heron — and it makes me want to write a poem. Usually it's a line that comes into my head, and I write it down in my notebook. I don't know where it's going to go.

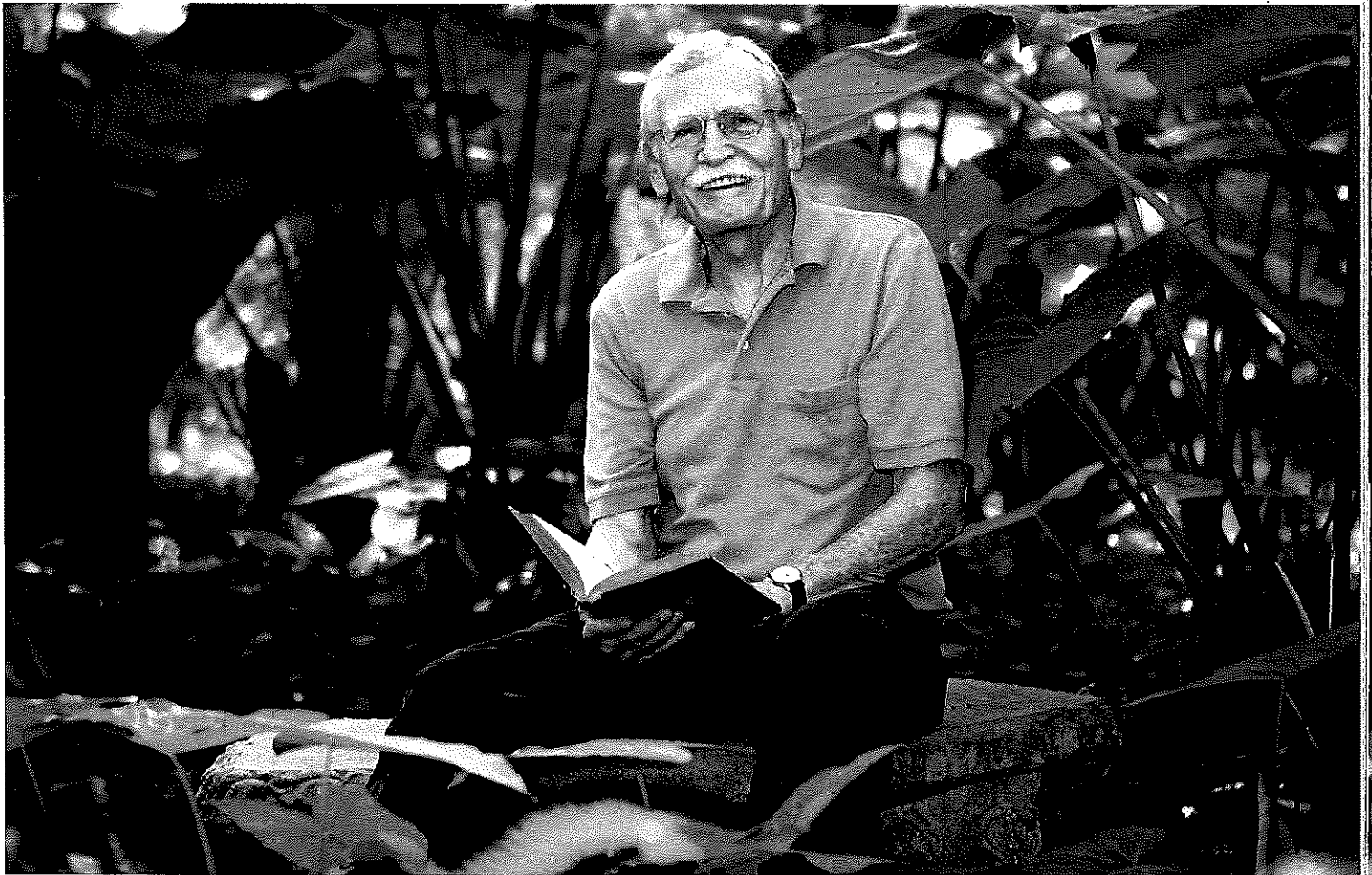
Free verse is fun, but there's an extra pleasure when you write a sonnet, a villanelle, or a rondo. The form should be a window, not a mirror — looking through you see what's being said. Only when you look back at it, the form becomes clear.

Favorite poets?

Richard Wilbur, he wrote hundreds of sonnets. And William Butler Yeats — marvelous in his ideas and his forms. I also like Phillip Larkin and Gwendolyn Brooks. I believe poets are citizens. I write about politics, and she did that, too. There are wonderful stories in her poetry. And Howard Nemerov, I was the first graduate student to write about him. It was my first publication.

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PHOTO BY MARK WEMPLE



Florida Poet Laureate Peter Meinke enjoying a moment at a park across the street from his Driftwood home.

PETER MEINKE

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What is the best advice you've given your poetry students?

Hang in there; don't get discouraged; be patient. Don't wait for inspiration. Be disciplined. Write every day. I did it when I was tired, when I didn't feel well, when I had four young children. I never had a writing group, but I think that would be a good thing. Take the teachers' words seriously when they are talking about your poems.

Which poets and books of poetry do you recommend to someone wanting to develop an appreciation of poetry?

Outside of reading poetry, I think they should read *The Shape of Poetry*, my book on writing. It gives you specific examples, lots of examples, and the idea that a poem is looking for its shape. Find the right shape for the poem you're working on. I compare it to a potter making a pot — he follows the clay — or carving a piece of wood. You're working the clay or wood and doing what it would let you do.

And to parents who would like their children to develop an appreciation for poetry or literature?

We didn't push our children to be artists or poets. We let the kids do what they wanted to do. We did expose them to lots of books, poetry reading, theater. They basically all became scientists. But they are theater-loving, book-loving kids, movie-loving kids. Jeanne did a lot of reading to them; they read *A Child's Garden Verse*. Give them some poetry books.

Your wife of 61 years, Jeanne Clark Meinke, is an illustrator whose works have appeared in publications, including The New Yorker, Gourmet, Bon Appetit, as well as your books. What is it like working together?

Jeanne and I have worked together for so many years. Our very first book was the *Legend of Larry the Lizard*, a children's book of limericks. We still work together on a poetry column for *Creative Loafing*. We work together in separate rooms. I don't look at her drawings, and she's not looking at my writing. At the end of the week, we come up with our 700-word essay, *The Poet's Notebook*. Every other Thursday, we pick up our *Creative Loafing*, look at it over our coffee, or our gin and tonic for lunch. We're still doing this. What a nice way to live.

What would you say to someone wanting to go into poetry as a life's work?

I would say follow that dream, but you need a backup to how you're going to live. Make sure you get a job that won't detract from your writing. That's why people end up in teaching. You can write in the summers.

Many poets have worked in advertising. Wallace Stevens worked in insurance. He didn't tell anyone he worked with that he was a poet, and when he won the Pulitzer Prize, the people in his office said, "What, our Wally?"

Peter Meinke

Family: Jeanne Clark Meinke, wife of 61 years, four adult children

Hometown: Brooklyn, later in childhood, New Jersey

Current home: St. Petersburg since 1966

Education: Bachelor of Arts, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York, 1955; Master of Arts, University of Michigan, 1961; doctorate in English literature, University of Minnesota, 1965.

U.S. Army, 1955–57

Assistant professor: Hamline University, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1961–66

Professor of Literature and director of writing workshop, Eckerd College, 1966–1993

Publications:

Eight books in Pitt Poetry Series: *The Night Train & the Golden Bird*, *Trying to Surprise God*, *Liquid Paper*, *Scars*, *Zinc Fingers*, *Night Watch On the Chesapeake*, *The Contracted World*, *Lucky Bones*.

Fiction: *The Piano Tuner*, winner of the 1986 Flannery O'Connor Award, *The Expert Witness*

Children's books: most recently, *The Elf Poem*

Books of essays, including *To Start With*, *Feel Fortunate*, winner of 2017 William Meredith Award

Seven chapbooks of poetry, including *Campocorto*, winner of the Sow's Ear Award

The Secret Code by Peter Meinke

Bach was rising from another room

*like a secret code in a mathematician's castle
when you came toward me in a summer dress
light slatted through the oaken banister
like a secret code in a mathematician's castle*

*floating down the stairway in the afternoon
light slatted through the oaken banister
an idea of harmony made manifest
floating down the stairway in the afternoon
striping your slender body like a strobe
an idea of harmony made manifest*

*The music wound you in a golden braid
striping your slender body like a strobe
and Bach and April and undying youth
like music wound you in a golden braid
conspiring until I knew the dream
of Bach and April and undying youth*

*would cling across the downward years
conspiring until I knew that dream
despite the disharmonic tarnishing of time
would cling across the downward years
and fuse our lives together like a fugue
to spite the disharmonic tarnishing of time*

*Then all turned mysterious and blessed
and fused our lives together like a fugue
when you came toward me in a summer dress
turning all mysterious and blessed*

while Bach was rising from another room

—by Peter Meinke, from *SCARS*, 1996
first published in *The Georgia Review*, 1995