

Goldbarth's poetry reflects, analyzes

By MEGAN PAULY
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Albert Goldbarth is the Adele B. Davis Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Wichita State. An MFA from Iowa, Goldbarth is the author of more than 20 collections of poetry and three collections of essays.

Goldbarth's poetry has received a Guggenheim fellowship and three fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and has appeared in such venues as *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Harper's* and *The New York Times*.

His "Heaven and Earth: A Cosmology" won the National Book Critics Circle Award for 1992, and another collection, "Saving Lives," won in 2002. "Many Circles: New & Selected Essays," won the creative nonfiction division of the PEN Center USA's Literary Awards for 2002.

Goldbarth will read from his most recent collection "Everyday People" 7 p.m. this Friday at Watermark Books.

Here Goldbarth reflects on his extensive poetic career.

What was the first poem that you really remember being proud of? Thinking, "wow I might be onto something here?"

I've been hoping for that for 50 years of writing. I do remember trying to write short stories as early as kindergarten. I've been writing my whole life. The first things I thought of as poems were probably during my high school days, but whether or not I would count them as

poems now is arguable.

Do you begin your writing with research?

Not really specific to my own writing but just talking about my understanding of literature in general, I do think a lot of literature—not only poetry but certainly poetry—does not necessarily begin with a big idea, does not necessarily start with 'it's a shame you're afraid of death. I think I should look at the concept of mortality' but begins with somebody simply fascinated by the way two words clash together and one starts noodling away at that, the way two colors work in conjunction with one another, and what other people would call ideas, themes and subject matter, automatically start to accrue to that subject matter. It's not always the case, but I think it's the case more often than many people out in the world in general would say.

In your sequence of poems "Comings Back" (1976), one poem, "A Pocket Song," talks about tuna fish and peanut butter. What is the connection of these things?

I was your age when I wrote that poem. I will be 64 in January. It's a poem—that I remember—that tries to work out the kind of lively response of living on a slim budget of peanut butter and tuna fish. I always like to relate to the little people.

In a poem "35,000 Feet—The Lanterns" in your book *Faith* (1981), you refer to a grandma and grandpa character working with fish. Is

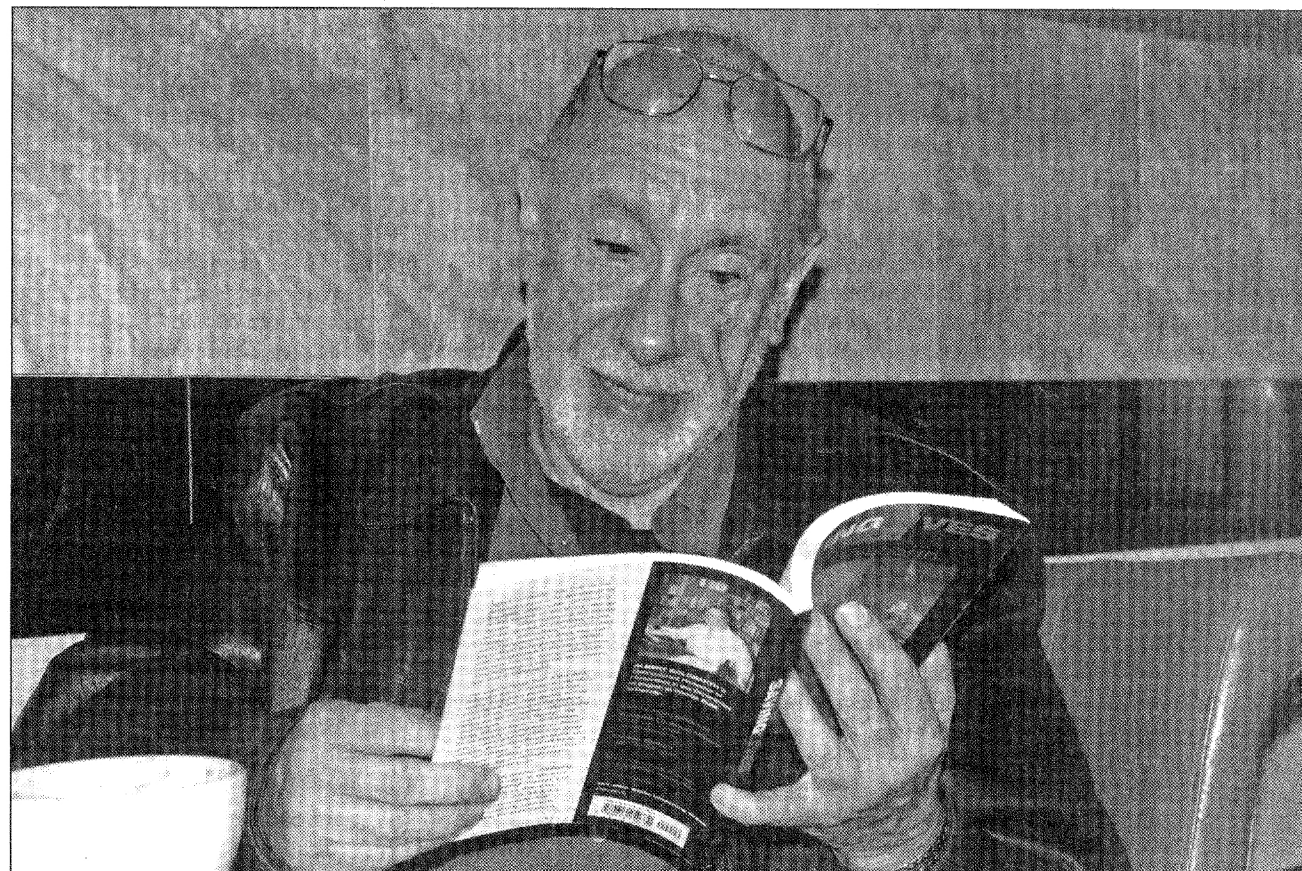


Photo by Austin Colbert

Distinguished Professor Albert Goldbarth's latest poetry collection is being published this month. Goldbarth will read at Watermark Books this Friday.

there a personal connection here?

The grandparent generation on both sides were lower, lower, lower, lower, lower, lower, lower middle class Jewish immigrants. On my mother's side, her mother and father held any number of low level jobs and at one time they owned a struggling little fish store in Chicago, in the days when to own a fish store meant you were gutting the fish yourself in a world without refrigeration, putting them out on a level of ice almost like a traditional European market. I refer to that in a few poems. There are a lot of people in my generation with immigrant grandpar-

ents who have written honorifically about the labor they have put into their lives so that their children's lives and their grandchildren's lives can be better and easier than theirs.

Is this a recurring theme that has carried over into your life?

Well, I don't have children of my own. My wife and I can barely take care of ourselves ... it would be a crime if we had children. But I will try to turn this into a high-minded, eloquent answer. Language itself, almost by definition, is a way of conserving things. True language is fluid. Words drop out of language and new words come into

being, but it's essentially what a word is: a way of fixating an idea or a description in a relatively permanent way. So to that extent, all writing—no matter how figurative or how experimental—conserves. That's what writing does. It is an album of people or ideas or objects or places it's concerning itself with. Beyond that, I think much of my work does have a fondness to the idea of conserving things, conserving sensibilities, that are on the brink of disappearing. Other people worry about disappearing species; my poems often worry about disappearing telephone booths and corner

mailboxes and the worlds that they represent. An extension of that would, I suppose, would be the idea that some of my poems serve as a kind of verbal album conserving people in my life, among those people my grandparents.

The last few lines of the poem "The Geese" in your book *Saving Lives* (2001) are as follows: "An old friend told me she was into the Audubon Society now. Hummingbirds migrate across the country, too, although we never see it happening. A thread in the lining." What is the connection with the friend?

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I don't write the poems so someone can do a biographical sketch of me. If I think in terms of their place in the world or their effect on the world at all, I think I'm writing them for you not as a microscope so you can look at me. To that extent, what difference does it make if a friend really told me that or if I completely invented it? To that extent, it would be like asking Herman Melville if he ever went on a whaling voyage. Maybe he did, maybe he sat down with the encyclopedia Britannica. It doesn't really make a difference. The only question is: How does Moby Dick bring you to your knees? That would be my real answer. It doesn't matter.

But it is true that my first wife had an interest in hummingbirds, she had a lot of hummingbird feeders in the backyard. And while I am not positive, it could be that she appears in the poem both cloaked as a friend and actually as my ex-wife,

adding confusing, disorienting baggage to a poem that didn't ask to be about those kinds of relationships.

That poem appears in your award-winning book "Saving Lives" (2001). The cover has a picture of your arm reaching down for your wife's hand. Did you save your wife's life, so to speak?

Of course, but I'm sure the opposite is also true.

You have a new book "Everyday People" that will be coming out this spring. Is there one poem in the book that perhaps captures the theme of what you're trying to do with the book?

There's a body of work to go into a book beyond this, in a few years. Stylistically, there is a wide range of poems. There are some poems that are six lines long, there are some that are six pages. There are poems that could be taken as autobiographical, there's a poem with a section spoken from the decapitated head of a stone statue of an ancient Indian goddess.

There is a little section in the book that in one way or another are Darwin-specific. Some may use Darwin as a subject character or try to address ideas I think are important to Darwin himself and some are just a very casual reference to Darwin as a starting point, but one way or another Darwin's presence is important to the poems of that section.

Could you compare your works over the years in terms of style and theme? Would you say there is a theme for each of your books?

I don't write the poems for specific themes for specific book presentation, but at the same time I work hard to give these collections of miscellaneous poems a shape, to allow the poems to become what I hope is a meaningful community of discourse among themselves. Again, the idea of how we might define the term "everyday people" asks to be addressed on and off through its entire length. The Hercules and Jesus reference comes from a little introductory piece.

By definition, they're half everyday people like you and me. It's not the Incan gods but the everyday. That asks to lead into a book that circuitously tries to remember that the flexibility of the definition of everyday people is worthy to note.

Backtracking a bit, what brought you to Kansas and what has kept you here?

The position I have was, at the time, a fairly attractive position. Quality of teaching, salary, etc. I had been living in Austin, Texas for 10 years, but 10 years felt like enough. Austin never really felt like my kind of place. Parts of Wichita really do feel very reminiscent to sections of Chicago I grew up in. I was happy to accept the position. I have friends here, my wife is from here, each year I find a few students I am pleased to work with, it has been good for my writing because there hasn't been much distraction away from my work and I own too freaking much to deal with the thought of boxing it up and moving it anywhere else, so here I am.

With a little bit of luck and

a little bit of heroic determination, I do make enough time for writing.

How did you meet your wife?

She was in a class of mine my first semester here. A little lesson for graduate teaching assistants: be careful who you sleep with, you never know what will happen. She already had a graduate degree in another field. I exempted myself from her thesis review. It was all very above board, except for the (sex). That was my first semester here, so she's been a part of my Wichita life for as long as I've had a Wichita life.

Care to comment about your collections?

They're truly extensions of my lifelong commitment to the arts. I've been a lifelong devotee of Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge, all products of Carl Barks, a very talented man both a writer and artist. When Donald Duck turned 50, it only seemed appropriate to honor him and the Disney Universe. Everyone had to bring a duck-themed piece, such as cold duck patte. There were duck-

shaped candles, Donald Duck videos aired in the background . . . it was quite the affair.

I am also a serious collector of a number of things from naughty 1950s pin-up art, happily and shamelessly. I also collect 1950s space toys. I think of myself as making a home for things literally disappearing from the world. They're finding a last meaningful community under my loving charge. I also have an avid love of old typewriters. I have never ever touched a computer keyboard. It's a strong principle for me. The world tries to bully me into doing it. All of my personal correspondence and all research has been done off-line.

Goldbarth will be reading poetry selections at Watermark Books—the same bookstore where he married his wife, Skyler Lovelace—this coming Friday.

Editor's note: This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity. For the complete version, please visit www.thesunflower.com