Readers are falling in love with poetry, for better — and for verse

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METRO DETROIT — When Amanda Gorman gave an expressive reading of her work, “The Hill We Climb,” during the presidential inauguration of Joe Biden in January 2021, it was a revelation to many: They don’t hate poetry after all.

High school or college literature classes where students read classical literature written in Old English, or complex verse rife with obscure literary allusions, have had the unfortunate side effect of leading many readers to believe they don’t like, or understand, poetry. But there’s so much more to poetry than that, and readers willing to give poetry another try might discover that contemporary works are as compelling, moving and relevant as other forms of writing.

As Melissa Rizer, a youth services librarian at the Ewald Branch of the Grosse Pointe Public Library, pointed out, people encounter poetry all the time through songs and religious texts.

“I think a lot of people have a preconception about (poetry) that it’s very academic,” Rizer said. “I think we are all poetry readers — just not in print.”

March is National Reading Month and April is National Poetry Month, and writers and librarians alike are encouraging readers to dip their toes into the waters of poetry.

“Poetry really helps you make sense of the world around you in a personal and deep way, and in these times, we need that more than ever,” Rizer said.
Kelly Fordon, of Grosse Pointe City, is an author of fiction and poetry, and she also teaches creative writing. She said lots of modern poets write accessibly and cover subject matter relevant to everyday life.

“And people aren’t (only) writing in strict form, which I think was off-putting in the past,” Fordon said.

A good place for people to explore poetry is online through The Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org. The nonprofit offers a free book club, free classes, podcasts and more.

The Academy of American Poets will email a poem by a different writer to anyone interested in this service, at no charge, and readers can also often find a link to the poet reading the work. Visit https://poets.org for more information.

Attending a poetry reading is another good entry point for readers. Local libraries routinely feature poets reading their works, and Fordon said there are also many readings available on YouTube. Locally, nonprofits such as the Detroit Writers’ Guild — ht www.dtwguild.org — and Springfed Arts — https://springfed.org — also host readings and classes for writers.

M.L. Liebler, the poet laureate of St. Clair Shores and a professor at Wayne State University, said he’s seeing more interest in poetry by his students, many of whom are connecting with it via social media sites like TikTok and Instagram.
“People have seen enough television, and they’re looking for an alternative creative outlet, and poetry seems to be hitting a creative nerve,” Liebler said.

The stress and uncertainty of the pandemic era have played a role, as well.

“When there’s trouble (in society) like there is now, people turn inward, and one of the ways people turn inward is through poetry,” Liebler said.

Olivia Olson, the head of the community engagement department for the Troy Public Library, said they’ve seen an uptick in interest for poetry.

“Poetry can be many, many different things,” Olson said. “Maybe what a person was exposed to in high school or younger wasn’t to their liking, but there’s so much more out there. ... I think people often think poetry is written by ... dead people, (but) we have a lot of living poets and poetry that’s relevant to modern life.”

Olson said metro Detroit natives like Matthew Olzmann; his poet wife, Vievee Francis; and Jamaal May are among those whose work often resonates with newer poetry readers.

Liebler, an accessible writer himself, said there are many other poets with local roots — including Jim Daniels, Dudley Randall, Naomi Long Madgett, Melba Joyce Boyd, Jennifer DeBellis, Philip Levine and Joy Gaines-Frieder — whose work is accessible and deals with contemporary issues.

Olson said poetry is a way to see the world from someone else’s perspective, as well as to embrace the emotions and experiences all humans share.

“Poetry tends to be honest and reflective,” Olson said. “Poetry can give you some empathy. At a time when we’re really divided, it’s a way to (step) into somebody else’s shoes.”

Rizer concurred.

“It’s such a creative way to shift your mindset and connect with others,” Rizer said.

She also noted that poems tend to be short — typically only a page or two — making them easy for busy people to read and enjoy, even on the go. Rizer said poetry is a “great early learning tool” for children, and parents can bond with their little ones through reading authors like Shel Silverstein.

Librarians can be an invaluable resource for new poetry readers, recommending books and authors based on a reader’s other interests.

“Definitely stop by the library and talk to a librarian for recommendations,” Olson said.

Whether they’re reading it or listening to it live or online, many readers are connecting with poetry and falling in love with its rich use of language, cadence and musicality.

“There’s no one way to get started,” Rizer said. “There’s tons of stuff online and in the library.”