



GEM STATE LAURELS

by Chris Lewis

IDAHO GUBERNATORIAL TASTE determined the selection, 85 years ago, of our state's first poet laureate, a designation invented in England in the 1600s. Recently, however, Idaho re-titled and re-defined the position. Because these changes may be unfamiliar to many, the Idaho Center for the Book is publishing "Gem State Laurels" to clarify the nature of state literary recognition in Idaho. In addition to historical background, this article also provides biographical profiles of all of our "Writers-in-Residence"—the title replacing "Poet Laureate." To highlight the state's approach to its awards program, "Gem State Laurels" concludes by comparing our program to those of neighboring states.

The honor of being Idaho's poet laureate has been awarded to only two individuals: Irene Grissom was awarded the honor by Governor C. C. Moore in 1923; Sudie Stuart Hager was given the title by Governor C. A. Robins in 1949. Both awards were honorific (without stipends) and were for life.

Grissom, though a native of Greeley, Colorado, resided in Idaho for most of her life. She wrote three novels and an equal number of verse collections. One of her most highly-praised collections of poetry was *Verse of the New West* (1931). Grissom lived near Idaho Falls until her death in 1946.

Three years passed. Then, in 1949, Hager was appointed state laureate. Hager, like Grissom, was an Idaho immigrant, but Hager hailed from Oklahoma (and was educated in Oregon). She taught school in Kimberly, Idaho. Her best-known collection, *Earthbound*, was published in 1947. When Hager died in 1982, so too did Idaho's poet laureate program.

In 1982, then-Governor John Evans appointed a five-member panel of Idahoans, who were joined by western poets Brewster Ghiselin, Drummond Hadley, and William Stafford, to select a new laureate. It was this group that decided, instead, to recommend that Idaho select a writer-in-residence (WIR). The WIR would be appointed for a term of only two years but would be paid \$5,000 annually and would be required to give twelve public readings. As well, the panel recommended the writer-in-residence position should be open to writers of poetry, fiction and non-fiction. Applicants/nominees had to be living in-state; they were not required to be natives. These recommendations seem to have been made out of a desire to permit the state to recognize and financially reward more writers more often. In 1983 their recommendations were adopted by an executive order which also established a writer-in-residence panel.

With guidance from the Governor's panel, the program was initiated, developed, and administered by the Sun Valley Center for the Arts and Humanities. Financial support was contributed by the Idaho Commission on the Arts, the Association for the Humanities (now the Idaho Humanities Council),

and private gifts. In June of 1986, responsibility for the program was transferred to the Idaho Commission on the Arts.

Initially, the two-year award included a \$10,000 stipend and writers were required to give twelve in-state public readings. In 1998, due to budget cutbacks, the term of service was extended to three years, and the award was reduced to \$8,000.

Selection of the writer is made from applicants living in Idaho. Their anonymous writing samples are judged by a panel of three out-of-state writers appointed by the Idaho Commission on the Arts. There is no rotation of genre requirement, so fiction, non-fiction and poetry writers may apply simultaneously. Submissions are judged 60% for artistic excellence, 20% for contributions to the field, and 20% for oral presentation. The oral presentation consists of an audio recording of the author reading his or her work that is submitted with the application. The panel recommends to the Commission, which recommends to the Governor, who names the Writer-in-Residence.

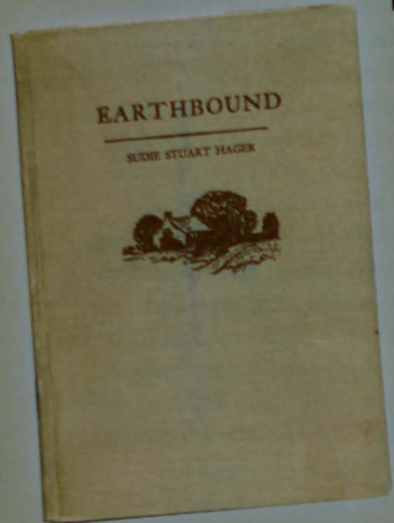
Some of the judges who have served on the selection panel (and one of their better-known works) include:

- Barry Lopez – *Arctic Dreams*
- Marilynne Robinson – *Housekeeping*
- Alberto Rios – *The Smallest Muscle in the Human Body*
- Ron Carlson – *Plan B for the Middle Class*
- Annie Proulx – *"Brokeback Mountain"*
- Dorianne Laux – *What We Carry*
- Ted Leeson – *The Habit of Rivers*
- Tom Spanbauer – *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon*

- Pattiann Rogers – *Firekeeper*
- Teresa Jordan – *Graining the Mare: The Poetry of Ranch Women*
- Vern Rutsala – *Walking Home from the Icehouse*
- Primus St. John – *Communion*

Acknowledgments:

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Irene Grissom

appreciative, adding, "Idaho—its politics notwithstanding—is full of thoughtful, interesting people. I wish I could have spoken to more of them in my travels so long ago."

Eberle Umbach

(1988-1989)

Idaho's first woman WIR was Eberle Umbach. Umbach's mother grew up in Boise and her grandfather built a cabin in McCall in the 1940's. Her mother left the state when she married, but Umbach grew up spending summers and Christmases in Idaho.

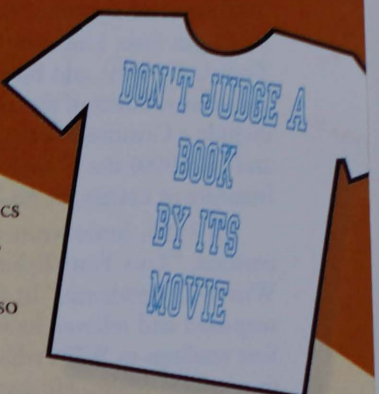
Umbach has no doubt that traveling the state as WIR had a definite impact on her life, though not in the ways that she had expected. "At the time all I was thinking about was the adventure of travel, taking circuitous back-road routes to get to the towns where I gave readings and led workshops—glorying in the pungent details and atmospheres of rural Idaho.

I was into the presence of place—from the purple mountain's majesty to the insouciant painted toilet bowls, planted with petunias and dotting the front of a motel in Owyhee county—and finding that rural Idaho has sense of place in almost unbelievable abundance. It was a thrill."

Now living in bucolic Indian Valley, Idaho, Umbach believes Idaho was always the counterpart to whatever she was doing, the point of comparison to which she returned. Whether she was in Lake Forest, Illinois, Phillips Andover Academy in Massachusetts, Oberlin College, Johns Hopkins University; the University of Virginia—even abroad, Umbach says her thoughts always returned to Idaho. This helped her realize Idaho was where she wanted to be.

Umbach explained she made the mistake early on of thinking that art in a rural community was the same as art in a more urban or academic setting, only inevitably of lesser quality.

While Umbach had always thought of Idaho as the place where she would end up living later in life, after her time as WIR, she decided: why wait? Over the past decade, however, she has been more involved in music than writing, composing music with her husband, John Hayes, for local groups, for community performances of plays at McCall's Alpine Playhouse, and for silent films, notably works by Nell Shipman. Umbach's most recently published prose appeared in 2006, when Impassio Press of Seattle included selections from her book, *The Weiser River Valley Pillow Book* in *In Pieces: an Anthology of Fragmentary Writing*.

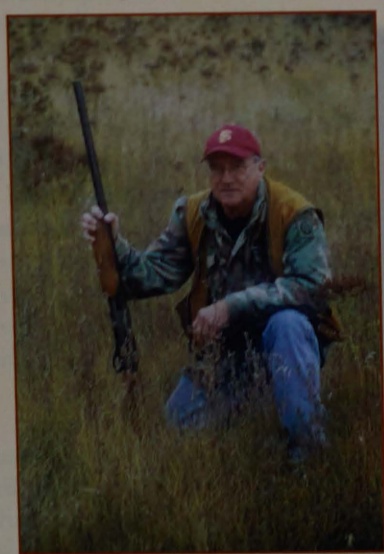


Ron McFarland

(1984-1985)

Idaho's first Writer-In-Residence was Ron McFarland. McFarland was born September 22, 1942 in Bellaire, Ohio. In 1950, McFarland's parents moved to Cocoa Beach, Florida. After graduating from Cocoa Beach H.S., McFarland remained in Florida, receiving both his B.A. (1963) and M.A. (1965) from Florida State University in English. He then began teaching college English in Texas. In 1970, after receiving his Ph.D. in English from the University of Illinois, he began teaching at the University of Idaho where he is still teaching today.

In 1984, when McFarland was appointed to the WIR position, the program was brand new and McFarland had the pleasure of being the residency program guinea pig. He recalls times when he was treated as a celebrity of sorts, being wined and dined, giving readings, talking to writers' groups. Other times he recalls being less celebrity and more substitute teacher. Still, even though the workload could be grueling, he loved it. "Here I was," he confides, "a mediocre poet and writer being treated like a big cheese. Hell, I was hardly enough of a crumb to bait a good mouse trap!" McFarland says WIR duties took him to a lot of places that he wouldn't have seen otherwise, and he is thankful for that. As a result of his position as WIR, Lewis & Clark College's Confluence Press, which had published one of his chapbooks (*Certain Women*) eight years prior to his residency, contacted him about writing a full-length collection,



Composting at Forty. And though he says "for a couple of years the program gave me a sense of myself as a writer.... I always knew I was a teacher first."

Robert Wrigley

(1986-1987)

Robert Wrigley was born February 27, 1951 in East St. Louis, Illinois. He received his B. A. from Southern Illinois University in 1974 and his M.F.A. from the University of Montana (Missoula) in 1976.

Wrigley taught first at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho, and has been a Professor at the University of Idaho since 1999. He has published seven books of poetry, and has been the recipient of numerous awards, including: fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Idaho Commission on the Arts. He was awarded the Kingsley Tufts Award in 2000, the Poets' Prize in 2006, and the San Francisco Poetry Center Book Award.

When I asked Wrigley what his goal was as WIR, he told me that his goal was "to get literary art—poetry, in particular, since that's what I write—into the state, into the schools, into the air." I also asked how readings given in Idaho compared/contrasted with readings given in other areas. Wrigley explained that, as WIR, he once gave a reading in Weiser and then two days later at the Library of Congress. He told me that even though the latter reading was well-attended and was held in an impressive venue, the Weiser reading was more rewarding. Wrigley believes many of the people at the LOC reading had probably been to many similar events, while the audience in Idaho was possibly unfamiliar with poetry readings. The Weiser audience, Wrigley mused, may have been one of his most



Neidy Messer

(1990-1991)

"I was born in Trona, California, and grew up in a small town in California called Avenal, where I went to elementary and high school. Our graduating class numbered 66 students, and 33 of them had started kindergarten together, of which I was one. Many of us still stay in touch.

"I began my undergraduate degree at West Hills College, in California, but finished my B.A. at Lewis Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho, where I received an award for outstanding achievement from the Lewiston Chamber of Commerce. I received a M.A. from Boise State University in 1988 and taught one year at BSU as an adjunct professor. In 1989 I began teaching at BSU as a Special Lecturer.

"From 1990-91, I served as the Idaho Writer in Residence and published a book of poems titled *In Far Corners* published by Confluence Press in 1990. I have published over 20 individual poems in a variety of literary magazines and am currently working on a second book of poems. I'm still writing

poetry and working on a book-length volume of poetry. Also, I'm involved in volunteer work, collecting donations of school supplies and books for school children in Uganda and plan to visit Uganda in the near future to teach. I have also worked with gathering donations of school supplies for the City of Lights women's and children's shelter in Boise. And as often as possible I golf with friends and family and hang out with my grandchildren."

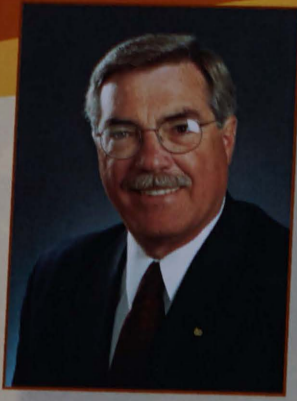


Daryl Jones
(1992-1993)

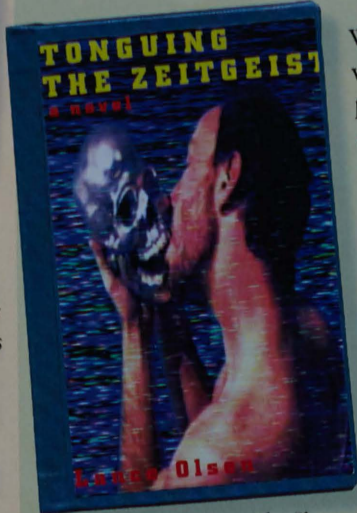
Daryl Jones grew up in Rockville, Maryland. He attended Michigan State University, earning his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in English.

Jones has taught American literature and creative writing at Michigan State University, Texas Tech University, and Boise State University. Some of the awards Jones has received include a Creative Writing Fellowship grant from the NEA and (in 1990) the Natalie Ornish Poetry Award from the Texas Institute of Letters for his book *Someone Going Home Late*.

In 1995, Jones wrote a piece for *Writers Northwest Handbook* entitled, "Two Years Behind the Lectern: On the Road as Idaho's Writer-in-Residence." In this piece, Jones talks about how surprised and relieved he was to see 30 or so people at one of his first readings as WIR, which took place in a small community in northern Idaho. He says that when his two years were up, he looked back on that event as a "poignant and telling example of the appetite for culture and the volunteer spirit that, against all odds, keep the arts alive in remote farming communities and small, blue-collar towns that dot the Idaho hinterlands." Later in the piece he says that "though the stipend is respectable, even ample by most writer's standards, the true reward of serving as WIR accrues from the opportunity to travel around the state and experience the diverse character—and colorful characters—of Idaho's communities." Jones points out that there were differences between the audiences of readings in small towns compared to larger ones, and also that those who came to readings in areas that were considered academic centers were different as well. In all of the places that he read, I gather from his article that he was never received negatively, only that he was received "warmly and enthusiastically." Jones concludes by saying that the people were the most memorable thing to him. He tells the story of a father with his two sons he encountered on the greenbelt in Idaho Falls as he was walking to a reading at Grace Hardin's bookstore. "As I approached, I could see that the older boy had hooked a sizeable trout, so I drew closer and stopped to watch him fight it. He played the fish patiently and surely, for several minutes, and then, with a sudden jerk, flipped it thrashing onto the grassy bank. No sooner it hit the grass than the younger boy pounced on it, seizing the bright fish in both hands and holding it high. The father turned to me, his face beaming, and said, 'God I love Idaho.'"



Iowa, Virginia, and elsewhere. Olsen currently teaches fiction writing, innovative fiction, and theory at the University of Utah. He is also Associate Editor at *American Book Review* and Fiction Editor at *Western Humanities Review*. With his wife, assemblage-artist Andi Olsen, he divides his time between the mountains of central Idaho and Salt Lake City.



Olsen said that his goal as a WIR was "to share my delight in writing and reading with as many people as possible, especially in smaller communities around the state that don't have much access to the sorts of conversations about books that I cherish. And, yes, I believe I achieved that goal, reading in, as I recall, several more than a dozen locales over the course of my tenure. Audiences were always gracious, always interested, always rich with questions and comments, always a pleasure to meet and

interact with. I've read widely across the States and in Europe, and comparing rural Idaho audiences to urban ones, in say, New York or Paris would be comparing apples and pears."

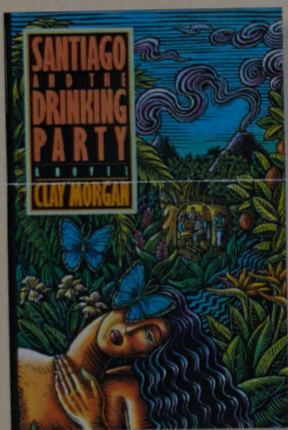
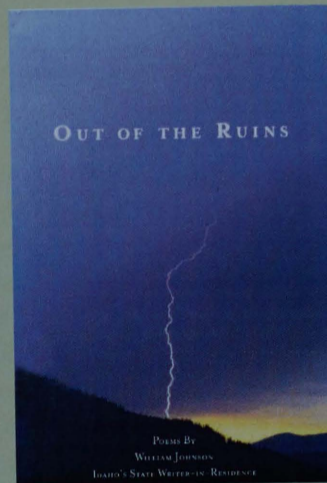
"What a gratifying experience!" he concluded. "I'm honored to have been able to be a part of it."

William "Bill" Johnson
(1999-2001)

William Johnson was born in Portland, Oregon, grew up in Washington and Idaho, taught in New York and Florida, and returned with his family in 1981 to make a permanent home in Lewiston, Idaho.

A scholar and poet, Johnson is the author of *What Thoreau Said*, a critical study of *Walden*, and a chapbook of poems, *At the Wilderness Boundary*. He has won fellowships from Fishtrap, The Idaho Commission on the Arts, and the University of Montana's Environmental Institute.

As a WIR, Johnson noted, "My goals were to find out more about the people of Idaho and to share my experience as a writer with them. My trips to out of the way places, like Cambridge, Orofino or Pocatello were refreshing. I got outside the academic box and met people—waitresses, housewives, welders, car salesmen, etc. who actually took an interest in poetry. The experience was a great gift to me. I became more flexible as a writer, especially in taking on the views of others. If the budget allowed for short term residencies and workshops—three days or a week—the impact of the program might be even greater. I'm grateful to have served."



Clay Morgan
(1994-1995)

Clay Morgan was born October 15, 1950 in Portland, Oregon. His father was a medical doctor, and the family moved frequently, but finally settled in Boise in 1959. Morgan graduated from Boise's Capital High School in 1968. He received his B.A. in English from Stanford University, then went on to earn his M.F.A. in fiction writing from the University of Montana (Missoula). Morgan and his family lived in McCall, Idaho from 1979-1998. In 1998, the family moved to Houston in order for his wife, Barbara, to train as an astronaut.

While in Houston, Morgan taught fiction writing at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. He initiated the Space & Exploration masters program at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. He has also worked as oral historian for NASA, recording experiences in the aftermath of the Space Shuttle Columbia accident. Because of his contributions, he received NASA's Public Service Medal, which recognizes exceptional contributions to NASA's mission, and is given to an individual who is not a government employee. Morgan and his family recently moved back to Boise, and he is currently teaching fiction writing at BSU.

When I asked Morgan what his goal was once he became WIR, he replied that he had already been working some as a poet in the schools, so did not change his approach other than expanding it to serve the community. Audiences responses were always different but, Morgan explained, were always positive—although their circumstances could be sometimes be unintentionally humorous. Consider the time Bill Studebaker hosted him at College of Southern Idaho in Twin Falls. Event posters were supposed to say "Reading and Workshop." Instead, they proclaimed the event would be a "Reading Workshop." Morgan laughed, explaining half of the people who showed up thought that it was going to be a lecture on speed reading so, to oblige them, he read as fast as he could. The audience loved it.

Lance Olsen
(1996-1998)

Lance Olsen was born in 1956 and received his B.A. from the University of Wisconsin (1978), his M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers Workshop (1980), and his M.A. (1982) and Ph.D. (1985) from the University of Virginia.

He is author of nine novels, one hypertext, four critical studies, four short-story collections, a poetry chapbook, and a textbook about fiction writing; as well, he has edited two collections of essays about innovative contemporary fiction. His short stories, essays, poems, and reviews have appeared in hundreds of journals, magazines, and anthologies. Olsen is an N.E.A. fellowship and Pushcart prize recipient. His work has been translated into Italian, Polish, Turkish, and Finnish. He has taught at universities in Idaho, Kentucky,

"Idaho roots run deep, and I was pulled (against my will) back to Idaho with everything I owned in my 1988 Honda Civic... Have been here 13 years now and was named Writer-in-Residence in 2001.

"I set no goals as Writer-in-Residence other than to write more new poems and to survive twelve readings. I achieved both goals. I read at a dozen dinky towns and enjoyed meeting the people who showed up for the readings. There were always fewer people at my readings than any cowboy poet would have brought in but still it was obvious that every town had a few citizens who 'liked' poetry...

"You ask about the state of the arts in Idaho? How can I answer that question? Bleak, like every state. The state of the arts is based on the state of the artists."



Kim Barnes
(2004-2007)

Kim Barnes received her B.A. from Lewis-Clark State College in 1983, her M.A. from Washington State University in 1985, and her M.F.A. from the University of Montana (Missoula) in 1995.

She is the author of two memoirs, *Hungry for the World* and *In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in Unknown Country*, which was a finalist for the 1997 Pulitzer Prize. *In the Wilderness* also was honored with a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award and was a finalist for the PEN/Martha Albrand Award. In 1996, Barnes received the PEN/Jerard Fund Award for an emerging woman writer of nonfiction. Her first novel, *Finding Caruso*, was published by Marian Wood Books/Putnam. Her second novel, *A Country Called Home*, was just published by Knopf. She is co-editor of two anthologies: *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Contemporary Western Women Writers*, and *Kiss Tomorrow Hello: Notes from the Midlife Underground by Twenty-Five Women Over Forty*. Barnes' essays, poems, and stories have appeared in a number of nationally-known magazines and anthologies. She is currently at work on a third novel set in Saudi Arabia as well as a collection of personal essays. Barnes teaches creative writing at the University of Idaho and lives with her husband, the poet Robert Wrigley, on Moscow Mountain.

When asked about her goals as WIR, Barnes said her main goal was to fulfill the obligations and expectations of the position by bringing literature to audiences throughout the state and especially to rural communities. Because of her upbringing, she felt an understanding of some of the more rural areas, "Because I was born and raised in rural Idaho (very rural), I understand how important it is to reach out to communities that don't always realize the kind of cultural enrichment that more urban areas are granted. As much as anything, my goal was to connect with these communities as a fellow Idahoan and to bring a part of the larger world in with me, even as I am always taking some part of Idaho out into that same larger world. And, yes, I do feel that I realized this goal." Like other writers awarded residencies, Barnes recalled larger communities were more accustomed to public readings than smaller communities. Smaller communities, she observed, were more hesitant, although in both women were eager to come to the readings, and would drag their husbands along for some "culture." She remembers some of her greatest compliments coming from those husbands.

Anthony "Tony" Doerr
(2007-Present)

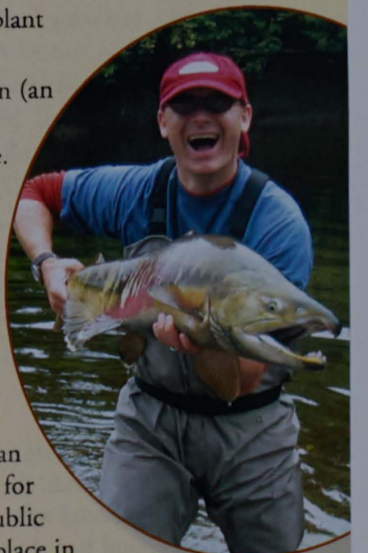
(Adapted from the Idaho Commission on the Arts' website)

"Doerr, born near Cleveland, has lived in Boise since 2000. He attended Bowdoin College in Maine...[and]...went on to Bowling Green State University, earning an MFA in writing, with a concentration in fiction, in 1999. Before and after college, he worked and traveled to Alaska, New Zealand, Kenya, the Windward Islands; on sheep ranches and as a cook in Telluride and on the 'slime line' at a fish packing plant in Ketchikan."

Doerr and his wife, Shauna Eastman (an Idaho native), "are now parents of twin three-year-old boys..." and live in Boise.

Doerr has authored *The Shell Collector: Stories* (2002); *About Grace: a Novel* (2004); and *Four Seasons in Rome: On Twins, Insomnia, and the Biggest Funeral in the World... The Shell Collector*, which has gone through five printings in cloth and three in paperback, was a *New York Times* 'Notable Book of 2002' and an American Library Association 'Outstanding Book for 2003'; Doerr received the New York Public Library 'Young Lions Award' and first place in the Barnes & Noble Booksellers 'Discover Prize for Fiction.'...In 2002, he was awarded an NEA Fellowship in writing...[the] Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University, 2003-2004 and the Rome Prize, awarded by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 2004. Book-of-the-Month Club selected *About Grace* as one of the 'Five Best Novels of 2004.'"

When asked about his goals as WIR, Doerr said that he wants to get to know the state better, especially eastern and northern Idaho. So far, Doerr has had the chance to read in Moscow and Coeur d'Alene, and he hopes to be able to read in eastern Idaho in the spring. "I'm beginning to get out more," he says, "and to see more of the people of the state—certainly more than I otherwise would."



Jim Irons
(2001-2004)

"I was born in Wendell and...I really loved growing up in the Hub City of Magic Valley, where I played all sports and read voraciously and hunted and fished and rode horses on summer days out into the desert with my girlfriend Leah... Later my parents moved me and my siblings to Boise. I was an eighth grader and thought life had ended, but eventually football, basketball and track would bring me new friends and girlfriends. Graduated middle of the pack from Capital High. Had a couple of basketball scholarships, turned them down. Went on to poetry and sorrow.

"Twenties a blur of drinking and odd jobs and nearing thirty decided to get married and get out of Dodge. Moved to San Francisco, and lived in Cole Valley with poets on every block: if I may name drop, Michael McClure, Tom Gunn, and August Kleinzahler were the most prominent. Stayed in San Francisco for 13 idyllic years, discounting divorce and more low-paying jobs....

Mr. October

I don't like baseball but I'm watching it
Because I like Manny Ramirez
Who is hitting everything.
It's October
And there's a fever in the air,
Playoff fever,
But I'm depressed.
I just found some old photographs
Of you and, my god, you were more beautiful than
Baseball on an October night.
You were more beautiful than the moon,
Hurled like a fastball by God.
I swung & missed.
I whiffed it.
Bases loaded, game on the line,
Three men left stranded,
But not as stranded as me:
Mr. October, meet
The Strikeout King.

Jim Irons



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