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Furman's poet laureate

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Furman's poet laureate

English professor publishes his fourth book of verse

Gilbert Allen would probably be the first to acknowledge that writers looking to make a name for themselves should not assume that poetry will be their ticket to fame, wealth and public acclaim.

As he notes with a wry tone, "Poetry is to the publishing world what chamber music is to Top 40 music."

Because he has a good day job, having taught English at Furman since 1977, Allen is fortunate that he doesn't have to rely on poetry for his livelihood. For him, it represents a creative sideline, an outlet for personal expression and a release from the daily routine.

He's good at it, too. His award-winning work has for years been featured in leading collections and journals. Critics describe him as an astute observer of the human condition with an assured command of his voice.

In January, Orchises Press of Arlington, Va., issued Allen's fourth book of poetry, *Driving to Distraction*. The collaboration is the third between Allen and Orchises; previously, the publishing house released *Second Chances* (1991) and *Commandments at Eleven* (1994).

Such an ongoing relationship between poet and publisher is unusual in this day and age, says Allen. As he points out, it's difficult enough just to publish an individual collection of poems, and even poets who publish multiple books tend to bounce from press to press. Moreover, he says, most books of contemporary poetry are compilations put together through contests in which poets submit their work and pay a fee for the right to be considered.

"The contest format eliminates any kind of nurturing relationship between editor and writer," Allen says. "I'm fortunate to have established a close and productive relationship with Orchises. Its editor, Roger Lathbury, loves poetry, and we have developed a friendship over the years. For Orchises, poetry is, in many ways, a labor of love."

In his own way, Allen is doing his part to improve the prospects for talented poets, at least on a regional basis. With fellow professor William E. Rogers, he is a founder of Ninety-Six Press, which is devoted primarily to the work of poets from South Carolina. Since its founding in 1991, Ninety-Six Press has published 12 books, including an anthology of state poets. Future plans call for a second anthology ("We're aiming for 2004," says Allen) and perhaps a chapbook, or mini-collection, that would showcase the work of new and emerging writers.

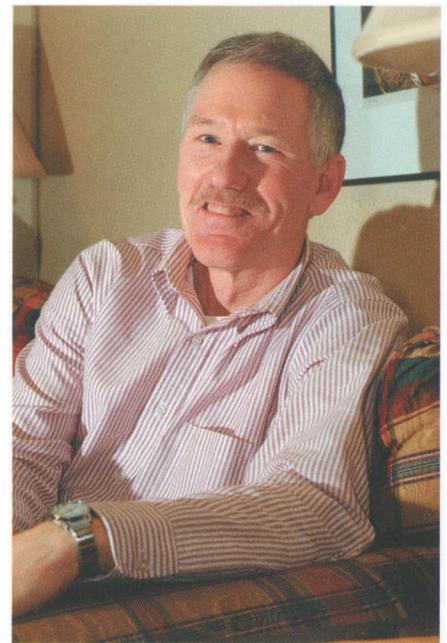
Allen does not limit his writing interests to poetry, however. In recent years his short stories have earned the South Carolina Fiction Project Award four times and the Porter Fleming Award twice, and he has talked with a company about publishing a collection of his work.

Allen says he wrote a lot of short stories during his undergraduate days at Cornell University in the late '60s and early '70s, but once he entered graduate school his attention turned almost exclusively to poetry. It wasn't until the late '80s that he began to revisit the art of the short story.

"The students in my creative writing classes were interested in writing prose fiction," he says, "so I decided to start writing prose again to refamiliarize myself with the process." He estimates that he has published about 20 stories, with "another 10 to place."

When not teaching, writing or publishing, Allen maintains a scholarly interest in poetry. But ask him to name some of his favorite writers, and the New York native has a hard time going beyond the borders of his adopted home state.

"There are so many talented poets in South Carolina alone," he says, fretting that he'll leave someone out as he ticks off the names of Rogers and William Arnes, his Furman colleagues, and such others as Claire Bateman, Wayne Cox, Susan Ludvigson, Starkey Flythe and Fred Dings.



Gilbert Allen's first book of poetry, *In Everything*, was published in 1982 by Lotus Press.

For fiction, he cites the work of George Singleton, a former student (see page 18), as well as Brett Lott, Rosa Shand, Robert Morgan and Ron Rash.

— Jim Stewart

Almost

*A good poet is someone who manages,
in a lifetime of standing out in
thunderstorms, to be hit by lightning . . .*

— Randall Jarrell

Just cosmic grumbling, then
a flash, unseen
but remembered

and I'm still on the porch
I think, with the ice in my tea
rattling.

Ten feet over, thirty feet
up, a bastard
pine, snapped

like a bad match, hangs
by its heartwood, still
smoking. And behind clouds

of carbon, in the iron
distance, a forged
rainbow, God's radiant

horseshoe, leans
on my telephone
pole, if you're keeping score.

— Gilbert Allen
