

Napa Valley, Calif.

Young poetry readers at Wherry Elementary School, N.M.

Students showing off their new books, Hidden Hills Elementary School, Ariz.

THE POETRY ROAD SHOW

BY JULIE A. MILLER

IF YOU happened to be waiting for a train in Los Angeles's Union Station on April 27 of this year or shopping for groceries at the Kroger Supermarket on Monroe Street in Toledo on April 8, you may have noticed a rangy, bespectacled guy with the earnest, clean-cut look of an aging Boy Scout handing books of poetry to surprised passersby.

Andrew Carroll has distributed Walt Whitman to motorists paying tolls at New Jersey's Walt Whitman bridge and African-American poetry to prisoners in Louisiana. He's also played Santa Claus in more likely places—such as schools. And he's managed to sneak poetry into telephone directories and hotel rooms, right next to that ubiquitous Bible.

The twenty-eight-year-old Carroll plans to get a real job someday, as a secondary school English teacher.

Julie A. Miller, a former associate editor at Education Week, is a freelance writer who lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

But for now, this is what he does. As the executive director of the American Poetry and Literacy Project—its only full-time employee, really—he distributes books of poems and promotes poetry, mainly among mainstream Americans who would otherwise be unlikely to ponder Poe on the subway or peruse "The Wasteland" on a stairclimber.

"The point is to fight the idea that poetry is difficult, that it's an elitist thing for students and intellectuals," Carroll says.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
(Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*)

Carroll, who lives in Washington, D.C., found his way to the media's radar screen last April, when he celebrated National Poetry Month by crossing the country in a Ryder truck (rental donated), handing out more than one hundred thousand volumes of poetry



Late night customers at Chicago diner



100,000 volumes of poetry, N.Y.C.



St. Louis Zoo, Mo.



Chicago Public Library



Walt Whitman Bridge toll booth, Philadelphia, Pa.

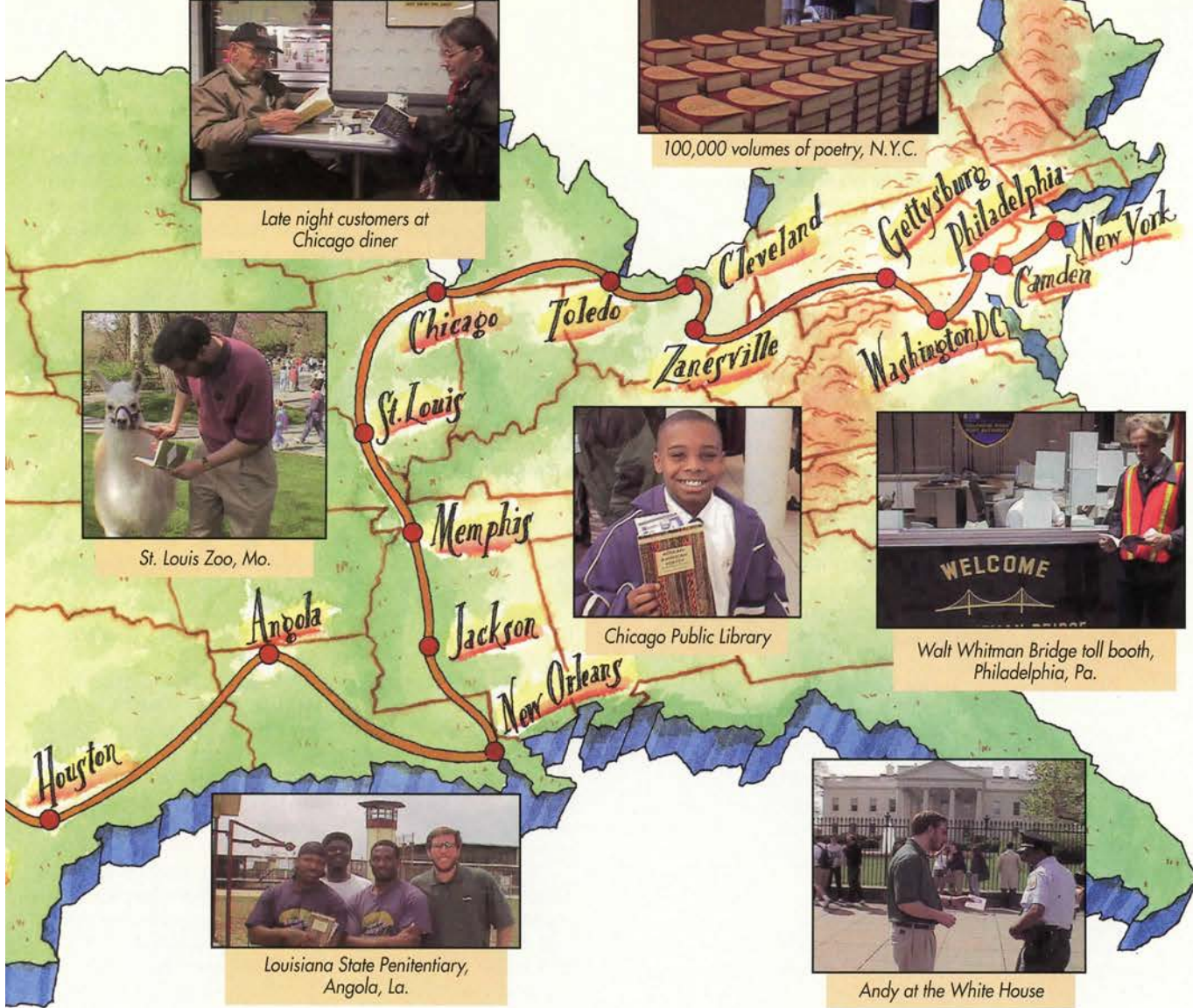


Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola, La.



Andy at the White House

MAP BY DAN SHIERBO/PHOTOS BY ANDREW CARROLL



and other literature. He called it the “Great APLseed Giveaway,” a play on his organization’s name and the legend of Johnny Appleseed, who supposedly scattered apple seeds the way Carroll passes out books. It also helped get him a sponsor; the Washington State Apple Growers was one of the primary backers of his road trip.

Carroll stopped in train stations, turnpike toll plazas, hotels, supermarkets, a juvenile detention center, churches, courthouses, lots of libraries, and several schools.

“The kids were in awe. We were in awe. We couldn’t believe somebody was giving 125 kids free books [each], the most beautiful bound books you ever saw,” says Vicki Fisher, a Phoenix teacher whose third-grade class at Hidden Hills Elementary School was one of several Carroll interacted with on April 22.

“He sat and read with them, he talked to them about what they’re doing,” Fisher says. “He’s great with kids, gets right down on the floor with them,

answers a million questions, lets them crawl all over him. You could tell he cares about kids and good books.”

Carroll claims that this positive reception is typical. When he asks kids how many of them hate poetry, he always gets at least some raised hands. When he asks the same question at the end of the session, there are always fewer of them. “If you can convince a sixth-grader that maybe poetry isn’t so horrible, that’s a day well spent,” he says.

As for adults, “There are definitely some people who say, ‘No, thank you, I’m not interested.’ But they’re few and far between—fewer than I expected,” Carroll says.

In 1996, the *Washington Post* described Carroll’s Halloween visit to an auto inspection station, where he handed out a collection of poems by Edgar Allan Poe:

Out in public, in the middle of a workday, people don’t expect poetry to get in their faces. Especially people spending their lunchtime idling in line at a vehicle inspection station....Some refused the poetry. But most gladly

accepted. It was an odd sight to see dozens of D.C. drivers, heads bent forward, books resting on steering wheels, reading Poe's dark verse.

"Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!"
I shrieked, upstarting—
"Get thee back into the tempest and the
Night's Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie
thy soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the
bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and
take thy form from off my door!"
Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."
(Edgar Allen Poe, *The Raven*)

Carroll's crusade was launched by a poet's speech about the civic value of literary art that profoundly moved him when he was a twenty-two-year-old English major at Columbia University. Joseph Brodsky, an exile from what was then the Soviet Union, was the U.S. poet laureate when he delivered the speech at the Library of Congress in 1991. It was later published by the *New Republic*. Brodsky argued that a nation bereft of literature was "on the verge of a tremendous cultural backslide" leading to the degradation of both language and democracy and was replacing "literacy with videocy." He advocated the distribution of poetry in supermarkets, gas stations, and motel rooms.

"The blue-collar is not supposed to read Horace, nor the farmer in his overalls, Montale or Marvell," Brodsky said. "Nor, for that matter, is the politician expected to know by heart Gerard Manley Hopkins or Elizabeth Bishop. This is dumb as well as dangerous."

When a friend handed a copy of the speech to Carroll, he said, "Brodsky, is he a cosmonaut?" But he was impressed enough with the poet's ideas to underline passages. And he wrote to Brodsky, asking if he could help realize the vision. Carroll was surprised to get a reply, much less an invitation to meet the poet, who also lived in New York. They hatched the idea for the American Poetry and Literacy Project in Greenwich Village cafes.

Carroll started with the hotel room idea, and Doubletree Hotels eventually agreed to place books in their rooms. It's an idea he still pushes, and he's hoping to get poetry into every hotel room in Salt Lake City for the 2002 Winter Olympics.

He has also persuaded publishers of telephone directories to plug poems into some spots where you'd usually see advertising. In some Florida directories, for example, a reader looking for travel agents will also find "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost. More than 12 million copies of poetry-enhanced directories have been published in every region of the U.S.

One letter Carroll treasures is from a woman who found one of those verses in the Waycross, Georgia, Yellow Pages.

"My husband was sentenced to six months [in jail] last week, leaving me to handle the business, the farm, the animals, and the pain of our separation," she wrote. "I was looking up newspaper numbers and saw the poem entitled 'Hope' by Emily Dickinson. I instantly had a smile on my face, the encouragement I needed, and the strength to keep trying."

Hope is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—...
(Emily Dickinson, *Hope is the thing with feathers*)

Carroll spent his childhood in the Boston suburbs, then went to Sidwell Friends School, the upscale private school that counts Chelsea Clinton among recent graduates. His parents, who adopted him as a baby, are divorced, and his father owns a book publishing company in Washington.

Carroll says he has "real sympathy for people who say they don't like poetry, because I didn't like the stuff much myself until recently." Neal Tonken, a teacher at Sidwell Friends, helped launch Carroll's love of literature, but he credits Columbia University professor Kenneth Koch, who has written books on how to teach poetry to children and adults, with "really changing my thinking on poetry."

Koch says Carroll was a good student and clearly liked poetry, but the professor was "surprised by his fervor when he came back to see me and was even more surprised he found a way to do something with it.

"Somebody once told me that writing poetry was like dropping leaves down a big well, and I think promoting it is like that, too," Koch says.

By some accounts, poetry is making something of a comeback. When the *Village Voice* looked at the topic in April, poets, editors, and publishers suggested that the notion of poetry as difficult, fostered by critics who reserve their praise for work that is, has begun to dissipate, with an assist from popular culture outlets like "A Prairie Home Companion."

"I've been involved in marketing poetry for ten years," says Houghton Mifflin marketing director Clay Harper, "and we used to just get the word out to other poets and hope they'd support their colleagues in the trenches. But then when things like the movie 'Il Postino' hit, we saw this expanded audience for Pablo Neruda."

Of course, some argue that a focus on popularization cheapens poetry. "National Poetry Month is a distraction; its success is irrelevant to real poetry," Charles Bernstein, a poet and a professor at the University of Buffalo, told the *Village Voice*. "Poetry at its heart should be an alternative to mass culture, not something that benefits from being on NPR and in the *New York Times*."

Koch thinks that promoting poetry to the public "is like chicken soup; it can't hurt." But he believes that while it could be more popular than it is now, the audience for poetry, especially good poetry, will always be limited. "Notice how it's always bad poetry that's making a comeback?" he says. "Is Shelley making a comeback? I think the truth is that poetry just goes on, with more or less of an audience."

His former student disagrees.

"People just need a push to pick up that first book and they're into it," Carroll says. "I get letters from truck drivers, people from all walks of life."

He agrees with the notion that poetry is growing in popularity. "There are more events; book sales are way

up. There is undeniably a poetry renaissance going on," Carroll says.

He speculates that the increasingly fast pace of modern life and its ever-increasing dependence on technology have "made life so automated that people have a sense of being disconnected. Everything's formulaic, anything that requires investing time and energy is at a premium.

"People are working harder and faster, and there's no time to reflect," Carroll says. "I think poetry helps us to slow down and focus on what's important."

Whatever the reason, Carroll's project has taken off in the past couple of years.

A year ago, he obtained a grant that allowed him to work on it full-time, rather than as a nights-and-weekends volunteer. But it's still a low-key affair, consisting of an unpaid board of directors, a fundraising consultant whose time is paid for by a foundation, and Carroll. He now has a donated storage space for the books, but he runs the operation from his apartment near Washington's Dupont Circle neighborhood.

The living room that serves as command central is the comfortable lair of someone who cares more for books—there are the expected many shelves—than for more worldly possessions. The wall above and around Carroll's desk is plastered with clippings and other found objects, ranging from pictures of John Steinbeck and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. to a poster announcing an event in which the Rev. Sun Myung Moon presided over a football stadium full of people marrying fellow devotees they didn't know. "That's irony," Carroll assured me when he saw my eyes wander in that direction.

He still calls hotels and makes personal appearances in the Washington area, but Carroll spends more and more time sending books to people who request them and fielding inquiries from teachers. Sometimes potential donors want to send books to a particular school or hospital; when he has a choice, Carroll favors "non-profit, public institutions that might not be able to afford books."

He's branched out into publishing, as well. The book that Carroll mostly handed out at the beginning of his crusade, *Ten Best-Loved Poems*, was a little too safe for his taste, and he wanted something with "a little more diversity." For example, he says, there was nothing by Langston Hughes. So Carroll collaborated on editing a new anthology, called *101 Great American Poems*, which was the book he handed out most on his journey.

Carroll also found time to edit *Letters of a Nation*, a collection of correspondence noteworthy for historic or literary reasons that sold well in 1997. Sales helped finance April's road trip, which will become an annual event. A new anthology is in the works; in 1999, Carroll says, he will give away poetry that is about "the lure of the open road."

Carroll's happiness at the positive reception the project has received is tempered by the fact that his mentor, Brodsky, didn't live to see it. He died of a heart attack in 1996 at the age of fifty-five.

"The whole time I was out on the road," Carroll says, "I kept thinking of how Joseph would have approved."

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

(Dylan Thomas, *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*)

Carroll says his next publishing venture will probably involve teacher's guides and reader's guides that he can hand out along with poetry, an idea that was inspired by Koch's books on teaching poetry.

For now, Carroll refers teachers to the Teachers and Writers Collaborative, a New York-based organization that disseminates books on the teaching of writing and literature, including poetry. The group also arranges writer-in-residence programs in schools and professional development programs for teachers.

Carroll was interested in teaching before he launched the poetry project but says that talking to students about poetry has solidified that ambition. "I love talking to kids about poetry," he says. "You can use it to talk about different ways to interpret things and different ways to say things."

One poem he often discusses in schools, especially with middle-school students, is "O Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman. "It has got a strong rhyme, and they think the blood is cool," Carroll says. More important, they usually don't know the poem is about the murder of Abraham Lincoln, and learning this puts a whole new perspective on what they've read: "You can talk about how Whitman doesn't use Lincoln's name in the whole poem, about how the best way to hit a target is sometimes at a slant.

Carroll's advice to teachers is to avoid making poetry a chore by requiring memorization or giving tests about the "right" interpretation of poems. Instead, he says, "talk about how the poem made them feel, open up an internal dialogue. Allow there to be more than one answer."

"Whitman said that 'O Captain! My Captain!' is about Lincoln, but there's still a lot of room for interpreting the details."

O Captain! My Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is
won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:

But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

(Walt Whitman, *O Captain! My Captain!*)

Information about the American Poetry and Literacy Project and the Great APLSeed Giveaway can be found on the internet (www.poets.org/apl/aplp.btm). Or write to Andrew Carroll, The American Poetry & Literacy Project, 1058 Thomas Jefferson Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20007.

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