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—it’s 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.
and other literature. He called it the “Great APiSeed 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 Allen 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 old 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, upstaring—
“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 En-
glish 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 pub-
lished by the New Republic. Brodsky argued that a
nation bereft of literature was “on the verge of a
tremendous cultural backslide” leading to the degra-
dation of both language and democracy and was re-
placing “literacy with videocy.” He advocated the dis-
tribution 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 Car-
roll, 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
Doubltree Hotels eventually agreed to place books in
their rooms. It’s an idea he still pushes, and he’s hop-
ing to get poetry into every hotel room in Salt Lake
City for the 2002 Winter Olympics.

He has also persuaded publishers of telephone di-
rectories 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 in-
stantly 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 up-scale pri-
ivate 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 com-
pany 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 pro-
fessor 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 pro-
moting 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 sug-
gested that the notion of poetry as difficult, fostered
by critics who reserve their praise for work that is,
have begun to dissipate, with an assist from
popular culture outlets like A Prairie Home Com-
pany.”

“ 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 populariza-
tion cheapens poetry. “National Poetry Month is a dis-
traction; its success is irrelevant to real poetry,”
Charles Bernstein, a poet and a professor at the Univer-
sity 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 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 al-
ways 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 formulæic, 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 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!)


Teachers and Writers Collaborative can be reached at 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306 (telephone 888-BOOKS-TW or 212-691-6530; Fax 212-675-0171; e-mail info@twc.org; their web site is at www.twc.org).