

Former Delaware Poet Laureate Fleda Brown releases new e-book



May 11, 2013

Poet and essayist Fleda Brown remembers playing “the dictionary game” with her father. She would open the big dictionary to any page, and pick the most obscure word she could find.

I imagine the little girl poring over the large page. She has fallen into the well, deep into so much language, trying to secure the word that will stump her father.

Guerdon.

Maybe *spang*.

Brown, Delaware’s poet laureate from 2001 to 2007 and author of seven collections of poetry, recalls her father almost always got the definition right.

Fleda Brown

On Poetry

Written by

JoAnn Balingit

Filed Under: [Life](#)

“Words he didn’t know, he got by the roots,” she says.

Like Brown and her father, I love the dictionary. The fat sound of a chunk of pages, D to H, falling from my hand. Scanning from *doula* through *downside*, I hunt for some new, exuberant word.

Being a visual person, I notice that the dictionary words on the next page—on back of that thin paper—shadow what I’m reading. Visibly, the next words wait for me.

In her essay “Books Made of Paper,” Fleda Brown explores such visual and tactile delights of reading. Since childhood, she writes, she’s recalled “what the page looks like, how far down the page, whether octavo or verso, where the lines I love appear.”

“Their meaning has to do with font, with ink, with crispness, delicacy, or heaviness of the paper itself. The Norton anthologies with their biblically thin pages, the Boxcar Children with its sturdier ones . . . Knowledge had heft and weight, it pressed itself onto the page, it spread itself and turned itself in the breeze like leaves.”

This essay on reading is from Fleda Brown’s new book, “Growing Old in Poetry: Two Poets, Two Lives” (Autumn House Press, 2013). Coauthored with Sydney Lea, Vermont’s current state poet laureate, “Growing Old in Poetry” collects pairs of conversational essays traded by the two writer friends on a variety of topics: houses, food, clothes, music, sex, sports, and more territory besides.

Sydney Lea responds to “Books Made of Paper” with an essay called “What Will Suffice,” words from a quote by the poet Wallace Stevens. Lea tells how he, a hunter, an eater of opossum and flicker “quite emphatically not a bookish boy” found himself one day enthralled and surprised by Pearl S. Buck’s “The Good Earth.”

Through recollection and a deep faith in language, these poets make discoveries about themselves as they write. The stories they share are wonderfully warm, revealing and intelligent.

Lea and Brown talk about why they can’t fall out of love with a childhood house; how they learn to love an invading raccoon—or even skunk; why one hates to ask parents for guidance; and how our hybrid wardrobes might relate to this era’s hybrid poems.

And Brown bravely considers how the shift from printed page to screen might change how we read and write, and think.

The Institute for the Future of the Book, “a small think-and-do tank” affiliated with the libraries of New York University, does research on how electronic documents will affect our discourse.

For the past five hundred years, say the Institute’s founders, we have used the printed book “to move ideas across time and space.” Now the networked book, say the futurists, will be the reinvention of the book: never finished, always a work in progress.

Fleda Brown has been thinking about the future of the book. Her essay on reading goes on to consider her Kindle. Has it transformed her reading, or not?

Although in her mind “a poem cries out for paper,”

“There’s nothing more or less “real” about the words on Kindle versus the words pressed onto paper. The words themselves are not real. They’re metaphors for what we “see” . . . What matters is the relationship with meaning. . .

She concludes that her generation—“who’s been knocked on its tail by the systematic unmooring of all we held sacred”—will somehow “learn to love the word as it flashes . . . from [the] screen.”

After all, a hardcover dictionary like “The New Oxford American Dictionary” can be 2000 pages long and portable only from the shelf to your desk. But “The New Oxford American Dictionary” for iPhone lets you carry “250,000 entries, 60,000 audio pronunciations, and a powerful search tool” in your pants pocket.

Even if you can’t browse alphabetically. And—can you play the dictionary game from that app?

When I met Fleda Brown ten years ago, she was strictly a pencil and legal pad kind of poet. Now she composes her poems at the keyboard. “I don’t have time to do all that writing by hand.”

And as for reading on-screen: “I like being able to summon books from the ether and have them magically appear,” she writes.

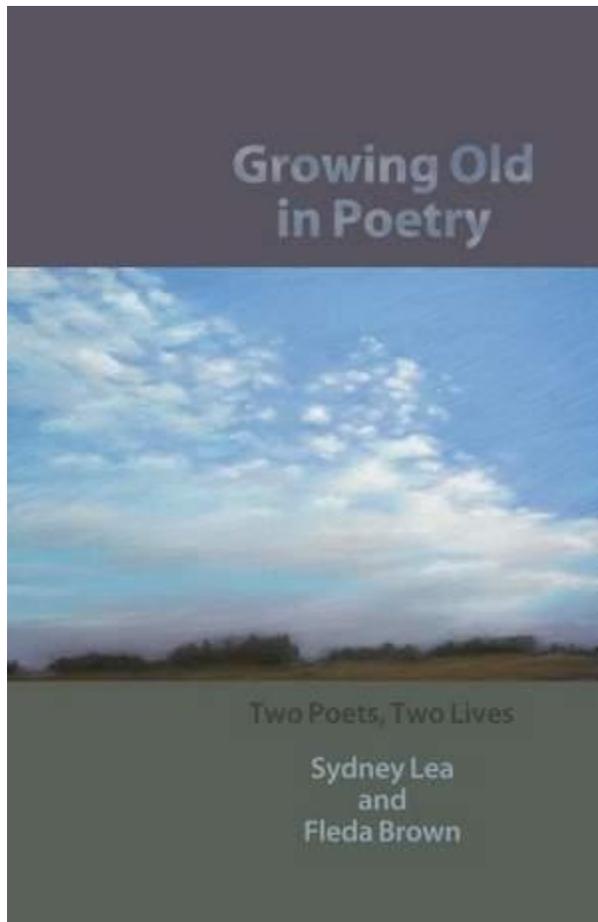
It’s fortunate that Fleda Brown has grown fond of her Kindle, loving its practicality and putting up with its shortcomings. Autumn House Press, as it turns out, decided to release “Growing Old in Poetry” as an e-book only, for Kindle. A great number of their sales are e-book sales, the editor told Brown.

“Since the new book is an e-book, we called the launch Books in Space,” says the intrepid poet. “We had my co-author Sydney Lea on YouTube, the editor of Autumn House Press, Michael Simms, on Skype, and the library staff helped people download the book.”

“If you offer a multimedia event, a lot more people want to come,” adds the poet. She thinks they got interested in the Skype-ing and the YouTube part of it. Many more people than usual came to the library for the launch.

As for the fear that Internet sales and e-books will undermine independent bookstores: “A lot of us are buying real books and will continue to,” Brown counters. “I’m reading four actual, paper books at present.”

And, she adds wisely, “I’m thinking fear is not the way we’ll move into this brave new world.”



Excerpt: Fleda Brown's essay "Unruffled"

My parents were getting along on my father's assistant professor's salary, with three, then four children, one of them seriously retarded and needing very expensive drugs. And neither of my parents thought of "managing" money. They talked and yelled and cried about "budgets," but nothing ever changed. ... Care packages of clothes would arrive now and then, things picked out by my grandmother, never clothes I wanted to wear. Many of them were a terrible embarrassment, all wrong for what I felt was stylish in my crowd, but I was made to wear them anyway. They were new and they were "nice."

There was one sweater, white with appliquéd flowers on it – a name brand and expensive. But the short sleeves had a tiny bit of a puff to them that felt dorky to me. And the flowers! Furthermore, my sister was given a matching one. A deadly move on my grandmother's part. I was made to wear the sweater to school. I may not remember this right, but in my memory, as soon as I felt I could get away with it, I deliberately held the sweater under hot water until the bright flowers on the appliqué faded onto the white sweater. "How can I wear it, now?" I asked. Did I really do that or just dream of it? I can't remember, but I am pretty sure that the fading happily happened. Of course my mother was somewhat careless about sorting clothes, so I may not have been the culprit.

— From *Growing Old with Poetry: Two Poets, Two Lives* by Fleda Brown and Sydney Lea (Autumn House)

POETRY EVENT : If You Go

WHAT: Linda Blaskey and JoAnn Balingit read a selection of poems in The Radical Reading Room of the interactive exhibition, "Imperfect City"

WHERE: Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, 200 S. Madison St., Wilmington

WHEN: Noon-1 p.m. Saturday

COST: Free

THEME: What makes a great city? How do you imagine participating in the utopian city of your wildest dreams?

FOR MORE INFO: <http://www.thedcca.org/imperfectcity>