

Word of Mouth

News from People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos

Poet Mark Doty: creating containers for the inner life

by Anndee Hochman

Mark Doty's first encounters with poetry came in the form of spirituals sung by his grandparents in east Tennessee: lyrics that conjured angels, rivers and the afterlife.

"It was language that was comforting and mysterious and seemed to point toward some other level of reality," says Doty, a memoirist, professor and award-winning poet who will read at the People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos benefit on March 11.

Later, Doty found similar mystery and invitation in the work of William Blake, e.e. cummings and Federico García Lorca. He began to write poetry as a teenager. "I had a tumultuous inner life, growing up as a gay kid...I couldn't tell people; I was afraid to. So making poems was an indirect way to have a container for my inner life."

Doty toyed with the idea of becoming an actor; for a while, he taught pre-school. "But I loved writing poetry. It was the one thing I wouldn't walk away from." He wrote throughout his twenties, publishing several small chapbooks; his first collection of poetry, *Turtle Swan*, came out when he was 33. That book earned praise from *Booklist* as "an example of how we live, how we suffer and transcend suffering."

My Alexandria and *Atlantis* also explored themes of loss—including the illness and death of Doty's longtime partner, Wally Roberts—through the lens of AIDS. *My Alexandria* won Britain's prestigious T.S. Eliot Prize; Doty was the first American poet to whom it was given.

Since then, Doty has published several volumes of prose, including three memoirs, a book-length essay and *The Art of Description: World into Word*, a book about writing. His poetry collection, *Fire* to

Fire, won the 2008 National Book Award.

Each genre, he says, informs the others: "As a poet, I'm interested in sensory perception, in trying to make the world vivid for the reader on the page. That spills over into my memoir. Sometimes I will take material and treat it in two forms; it's like tipping an object into a different light."

Typically, Doty's writing process begins with an image—a glimpse of goats in a field or something he observed on a Manhattan street. "That's an invitation; usually it's a metaphor that will yield some kind of meaning." Writing the first draft demands investigation that is both thrilling and scary. "So often, the writing process leads to strong feeling. If I'm working on a poem and get a deep desire to take a nap or vacuum the living room, that's an indication that I'd better stay there."

When revising, Doty reads his work aloud, listening for the music and the "rightness" of each piece. "A lot of poets have this mythical attitude that...we are the translator, the channeler. That's freeing, because it makes you feel that you are not solely responsible for the poem."

In the advanced poetry workshop Doty teaches at Rutgers each spring, he tells his students that writing builds both self-knowledge and perception. He loves to witness as their voices emerge: "They start to identify their obsessions. It's like finding your rocket fuel."

Doty's own work is fueled by concerns with "evanescence—that what we love will vanish; that we ourselves will vanish." He believes poetry remains essential in a world rife with violence. "When you're suffering, when you don't feel safe, being able to speak words that preserve your humanity...those words become a kind of lifeline. That's why poetry has lasted and why we turn to it in times of difficulty."

The People & Stories benefit featuring Mark Doty is open to the public. Invite colleagues, neighbors and members of your book club! Location and details at www.peopleandstories.org

NEH funds seed programs from coast to coast

Meryle Leonard felt anxious about bringing Sherman Alexie's short story, "Breaking and Entering," to a group of older adults.

Leonard, outreach manager of the Charlotte Mecklenberg Library in North Carolina, had partnered with PACE of the Southern Piedmont, a program of all-inclusive care for the elderly, to bring People & Stories to a senior day center.

She offered some snacks, explained the program and handed out copies of the story, which includes the death of a young black man who has broken into an older man's basement, a frank discussion of identity, race and power...and some blunt swearing on the part of the protagonist.

"I didn't know how the seniors would receive the language and some of the concepts," Leonard said in an interview. "I told them that I think it's an excellent story, very relevant to today. I told them there was going to be no censorship. They said, 'Oh, honey, we've heard it all.'"

Leonard's is one of ten sites across the country launching People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos programs, thanks to a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to bring the experience of "reading deeply" to new audiences.

Leonard thought the program was a perfect fit for the PACE population—elders who live at home and attend a day center for socialization and other services. "There's a need for programs for senior adults," she said. "People & Stories fits right into the library's mission and goals: to build a community of readers."

Her first session included 17 participants from a range of nationalities. All were women. Their reactions to the story were nearly uniform, Leonard said. "We talked a lot about the race issues. They felt it was unfortunate that a young life was lost, but they felt [the protagonist] had a right to defend himself. Some said he had to live with that fact for the rest of his life—that he killed someone."

Leonard was impressed that participants

eagerly explored the meaning of the story's title. "They were colorful in how they said that 'breaking and entering' applied to [the protagonist's] relationship with his family and community," she said. "I was over the moon and back. It was such an enjoyable experience to be able to share the story."

Other NEH-funded series are happening in a wide range of places, with a variety of populations: survivors of domestic violence in a shelter in Alabama; Latino library patrons in Illinois; re-entry participants in California; women in Alabama who are victims of sex trafficking.

"People & Stories fits right into the library's mission and goals: to build a community of readers."

Karen Mittelman, Director of Public Programs at NEH, noted in announcing the grant that "People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos shows us the power of ideas in the most vulnerable communities, creating opportunities for inspiration, reflection, and genuine connection to others."

In Greeley, Colorado, outreach librarian Cindy Welsh learned of People & Stories and thought it could be the ideal next step for immigrants and refugees who weren't ready to join a traditional book group.

Welsh and other staff at the High Plains Library District had offered practical workshops—English as a second language, citizenship preparation, GED study—for immigrants and refugees. "But my citizenship students would 'graduate' and say, 'What can I do at the library now?'" Welsh said. "When I read about Gente y Cuentos, I thought: This is that bridge."

Welsh also saw Gente y Cuentos as a chance to practice her own non-native Spanish—and, perhaps, to allow Spanish-speaking participants to take more ownership of the discussions. She plans to conduct the sessions on the site of two farm-labor housing communities. "I'm hoping people realize you don't have to have a high school degree to enjoy literature," she said.

"Writing is an extreme privilege but it's also a gift. It's a gift to yourself and it's a gift of giving a story to someone."

--Amy Tan

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With innovation, GyC thrives in Latin America

Outside of Bogotá, Colombia, a Gente y Cuentos program in an unlikely venue—a country club—captured the attention of the young golf caddies who worked there. In Ecuador, a local version of the program, dubbed “Pícnic de Palabras” (Word Picnic), takes place in public parks.

And in Puerto Rico, nineteen civic leaders attended a two-day training last fall, led by longtime P&S/GyC coordinator Alma Concepción; they are currently launching four programs in schools and communities.

Forty-five years after Sarah Hirschman founded Gente y Cuentos among Spanish-speaking women in a Cambridge housing project, the program’s Latino roots continue to grow new, innovative branches.

“Sarah was in love with Latin America—the literature, the people and the culture,” said Concepción. In the 1970s, Hirschman brought Gente y Cuentos to a housing project in Puerto Rico; in the 1980s she established a group in an Argentinian barrio. “A few days before her death, she asked me to never forget the importance of expanding and maintaining the programs in Latin America,” Concepción said.

Along with coordinator Marcy Schwartz, Concepción has worked to keep that promise. In sites that include Colombia, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, Chile, Mexico and Argentina, People & Stories often dovetails with existing programs that promote books and literacy. “It’s been important to link the program to an institution that’s already doing things,” said Schwartz. “Nobody has the money to start it up from scratch.”

But the lack of a central organizer—there is no People & Stories office in Latin America, nor paid staff—also creates room for creative partnerships and innovations, Schwartz said.

In Colombia, for instance, organizers have had success with a funding formula that invites a business or corporation to pay for a Gente y Cuentos group on-site, while simultaneously funding a program in the community. In Santiago, Chile, Macarena

Urzúa, a professor who learned about People & Stories while doing graduate work at Rutgers, led a training last fall for eighteen coordinators, some of whom work as “reading promoters” in public libraries.

“Gente y Cuentos is a particularly original vehicle to...share the literary wealth of Latin America.”

“A young coordinator in Colombia, doing her master’s degree, ended up coming to a small training and ran two eight-session programs in a prison. She’s been such a pioneer!” Schwartz said. “People are so giving and enthusiastic and creative.”

The audiences for Gente y Cuentos in Latin America are similar to those in the U.S.—programs have taken place in prisons, schools, libraries, maternity homes for unmarried women, drug rehab centers and community organizations for youth.

In January, at the first session of a Santiago-area program, a dozen young men who are “law infringers” gathered for a reading of “La prodigiosa tarde de Baltazar” (“Balthazar’s Marvelous Afternoon”) by Gabriel García Márquez, led by Urzúa. The young men, aged 17-25, compared the small-town setting of the story to their own barrios, Urzúa said.

In Puerto Rico, the programs beginning this spring include one in El Caño, a historically underserved community where residents face health risks from a contaminated canal. “These are all communities where people have not had much access to education and who have been deprived of the basics,” said Concepción.

“Sarah deeply believed in learning from each other, in democratizing culture,” she added. “Gente y Cuentos is a particularly original vehicle to help address questions of inequality and to share the literary wealth of Latin America.”

“It’s these programs that have to do with the spirit that help people find the strength to be able to live through these very, very difficult times.”

“A story to me means a plot where there is some surprise. Because that is how life is—full of surprises.”

--Isaac Bashevis Singer

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P&S in 2015: the numbers and the names

by Patricia Andres

“The ability to have somebody to tell your story to is so important. It says: I was here. I may be sold tomorrow. But you know I was here.”

--Maya Angelou

“Glance” is one word that writer Raymond Carver used to describe the compressed art of the short story form. Because short stories represent complex human experiences in a very few pages, the glance, though quick, is penetrating.

At this time of year, we like to glance back and assess our performance: to celebrate what we’ve accomplished, to identify challenges and to find our growing edges. And since numbers tell a story, we like to analyze them to discern best directions as we move forward.

So here are the numbers, followed by the names of all those whose support helped us in 2015. As always, we are deeply grateful for all who make this work possible. We want to acknowledge the many friends and donors who help keep People & Stories/ Gente y Cuentos vibrant, creating access to literature one story at a time.

Coordinators:
New York
Alma Concepción
Deborah Salmon

France
Katia Salomon

2015 Service Report

Participants Served:	565
Programs:	35
Partner sites:	20
Coordinator trainings:	3
Coordinators:	17
English programs:	27
Spanish programs:	8
Re-entry/prison sites:	10
Youth programs:	7
Senior programs:	8
Recovery, Homeless and Veterans programs:	4
Community groups:	4

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***“No story is the same
 to us after a lapse of
 time; or rather we who
 read it are no longer the
 same interpreters.”***

--George Eliot

Texts had power to wake, unite a group of vets

by *Scotia W. MacRae*

Note: The names of participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

Bobbie, a soft-spoken man in his 50s, seemed to be doing well. He was one of the veterans I met in 2015 when I coordinated a People & Stories program at the Lyons Campus of the Department of Veterans Affairs in New Jersey. “I want to get a GED,” he said during the first session. “I thought this would help.”

Our first story was “The Man Who Found You in the Woods,” by Catherine Ryan Hyde, about an infant abandoned in the woods by his mother. Nathan, a hunter, rescues him. The baby, later named Nat, is raised by his grandmother. Nathan does not see the child for years, then takes him in at the age of 15 because the grandmother can’t cope with Nat’s bad behavior. The story inspired several participants to talk about how they got into trouble as kids and how their parents dealt with it.

At the next session, Bobbie said he had never understood poetry and wanted some insights about reading it. That day, we read “Thank You, M’am,” by Langston Hughes, about an older woman who teaches a life lesson to the young boy who attempts to snatch her purse. We also read several poems by Hughes. By the end of the discussion—which included talk about clothes people wore in high school, including the blue suede shoes that figure in the story—most participants felt that Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones had put the boy on a positive path.

Isabel Allende’s “Two Words” prompted thoughts about the psychology of the colonel who, after terrorizing people, wants to be elected and inspire love rather than fear. He kidnaps a woman who makes her living by selling words, in the hope that she will craft him a winning speech. She whispers two secret words into his ear. This inspired participants to guess what the

words were and led to a discussion of the importance of words in dealing with life.

“The Things They Carried,” by Tim O’Brien, brought tears to Pat’s eyes. He had been in Vietnam. “That’s exactly the way it was,” he said. I was pleased when one participant asked for a second session on this evocative story; the next week’s discussion ranged wider as participants picked up on the interactions among characters, the mind-numbing journey through the jungle and the significance of the mementos the soldiers carried.

“The Things They Carried,” by Tim O’Brien, brought tears to Pat’s eyes. “That’s exactly the way it was,” he said.

“They [the military] wind you up so much that you can’t unwind,” Jack said, “and then you end up in a place like this.” After that, the group began discussing the realities of war and the pointlessness of people killing each other. All agreed there should be a better way.

At the final session in December, we read “The Gift of the Magi,” by O. Henry, and participants talked about the gifts they had given to people they loved. That day, Bobbie fought to keep his eyes open. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I work in the kitchen starting at 5:30 in the morning.”

I handed out certificates, roses, and books of short stories; I was touched by the men’s delight in receiving flowers. A photo of me with the participants shows Bobbie smiling, proudly holding his certificate. “I feel good,” he wrote on his evaluation. “Also enjoy being part of a group.”

In the first week of 2016, I learned that Bobbie had died. He’d gone missing over the holidays; the next anyone knew, people had come to Lyons to collect his belongings. I hope whoever has his book of short stories will read it and think of him.

“Maybe we build the stories we love into ourselves...our minds assemble images and sensations, our hearts find connections with other hearts...”

--Anthony Doerr

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Sharing passion for reading with young and old

Talking with Ellen Gilbert

by Anndee Hochman

Ellen Gilbert loved being just another reader in the room.

When she took her seat in the circle of women at The Albert M. “Bo” Robinson Assessment and Treatment Center, she valued the instruction to be a participant, not a co-facilitator, in the People & Stories discussion.

“It was terrific,” she recalled. “I was incredibly moved. The women listened; they really responded. I love the dynamic among them...I found myself remembering things, listening to what they had to say and being amazed at what the stories elicited in me.

“There’s something magical about hearing somebody read the story from beginning to end...I found myself reading a lot more carefully, listening a lot more carefully and making connections.”

When the group read “Two Words,” by Isabelle Allende, a testament to the life-altering power of words, the women were curious about the phrase—never revealed in the story—that is whispered by the protagonist into the ear of a brutal, egotistical colonel. “Everyone wanted to know what the two words were, though there was some feeling about wanting to leave it a mystery, also.”

Gilbert’s affinity for People & Stories is no mystery. She was raised in Brooklyn—an early reader who used her mother’s library card to venture beyond the children’s stacks. After earning her master’s degree in library science at Columbia University, she decided to stay on for a doctorate. “I love books, and I love thinking about the organization of knowledge,” she said.

Her move from New York to Princeton—she had a six-month-old at the time—left her temporarily homesick. “I joke that I kept my car radio on WCBS and pretended I was caught in traffic on the Harlem River

Drive,” she laughs. “But Princeton is a terrific place to raise children; there are wonderful things going on here.”

Gilbert first met People & Stories founder Sarah Hirschman while working as a reporter at *Town Topics*, Princeton’s weekly community newspaper. Their rapport prompted Gilbert to become a Crossing Borders volunteer; now, as a board member, she hopes to share her zest for the program.

“I’m shameless about promoting things that I love and believe in,” she said. When she had the chance to interview Maira Kalman, author and illustrator of books for children and adults, she left Kalman with some literature about People & Stories.

“I’m shameless about promoting things that I love and believe in.”

Gilbert also shares her passion for books with two Princeton kindergarteners through GrandPals, a Princeton Senior Resource Center program that pairs older adults with children in local elementary schools for weekly reading sessions. She’ll soon teach a course on the history of libraries through The Evergreen Forum, an adult education program.

Last spring, in conjunction with the 150th anniversary of the publication of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, she taught an Evergreen Forum course on the book. Her students included a few poets, a playwright, a mathematician and an artist. For their final assignment, Gilbert asked them to create a project related to Carroll’s classic.

One wrote a play; others drafted poems. “One of the most extraordinary ones was by an artist who created a little book, a tiny accordion book, her own version of Alice. And we had a great tea party at the end.”

While libraries have, of necessity, embraced the digital world, Gilbert believes there is no substitute for tangible books. “You can read for information, and the technology is fabulous. But books are beautiful objects, and part of the reading experience is the book, the paper, the width of the margins, the illustrations. There’s a physicality to it that you lose if you’re reading online.”

“...we have to give ourselves the opportunity to identify, to plunge ourselves in a story where we see the world from the bottom up or through another’s eyes or heart.”

--Sue Monk Kidd

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an evening with
poet/memoirist Mark Doty
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winner, 2008
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On the Bookshelf...

\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America, by Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Schaefer. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015.

by *Elizabeth Sims-Pottle*

In 2011, 1.5 million households with roughly 3 million children were surviving on cash incomes of no more than \$2.00 a day per person. Edin and Schaefer's book examines the political history that helped create that dismal scenario. Over the past 20 years, families who once relied on the public supports of welfare to protect them from extreme poverty lost that safety net, surviving instead by "whatever means necessary." The authors document what has changed since 1995—"the \$2.00 a day poor can no longer count on welfare for a floor of cash to help them manage through some very difficult times."

Edin and Schaefer illuminate a disturbing

trend. In addition to the hard luck these families share, most of the \$2.00 a day poor struggle with personal liabilities (physical, mental and emotional health issues); relatives who pull them down as often as they lift them up (for instance, providing temporary housing that exposes families to sexual abuse and drugs); unstable housing; a saturated market for low-wage employment; a dearth of jobs that provide a living wage; and unreliable transportation.

These obstacles make it nearly impossible for anyone without some type of financial assistance to emerge from extreme poverty. *\$2.00 a Day* delivers research-based evidence about why so many American families are now living in such desperation. The book also supports the need to continue—or, in some cases, to begin—a national conversation about income inequality in America and renew the call to action to ameliorate the plight of a growing number of invisible citizens.