

‘O Romeo, Romeo,’ What’s All The Fuss About Romeo?

by **Kaimi Rose Lum**

The other night I had a long talk with my mom, an English teacher, about “Romeo and Juliet.” She’s been teaching it for so many years that she can recite whole monologues from the play at the drop of a hat, and the prologue (“Two households, both alike in dignity...”) rolls off her tongue like everyday speech. The only difference is that she stops every few seconds to admire an oxymoron that she finds especially brilliant, or marvel at the way Shakespeare is able to compress so many layers of meaning into a few lines or phrases. Our conversation had been about birds at the birdfeeder before it veered, somehow, Bard-ward, and I hung up the phone an hour later with a whole new appreciation for Friar Lawrence’s plant metaphors.

And for how powerful language can be. In April I’m already thinking about, and fussing over, poetry more than usual, because it’s National Poetry Month, and here at Snow Library we’ve become poetry-pushers. One of our daily tasks is to pick a poem to slip into our borrowers’ curbside book bundles, and to scotch-tape to the front window, and since there’s so much to choose from and some judiciousness required (children are getting the poems, too), we end up spending a lot of time in the 800s room, where poetry is shelved. Rummaging around in there, seeing the well-creased spines of volumes by Emily Dickinson or Robert Frost or W.B. Yeats or Sylvia Plath, as well as virgin copies of books by newer poets, I often wonder what it is that makes a poet’s work stand the test of time – what books of poetry will still be in public libraries 100 years from now, and why.

Our role, for the moment, is just to put the work out there. As librarians, it’s not our job to align ourselves with a particular camp or type of writer or poet; we make decisions on what to add to or omit from our collection based on the interests of our community. At the same time we apply some rules of thumb or core standards, contained in a volume known as the Core Collection. The Core Collection tells us that holding on to Shakespeare, for instance, is a good idea – even if many of our patrons haven’t touched “Romeo and

Juliet” since the ninth grade. Why? Because he’s great, you answer with a shrug. But why is he great – what makes him worth reading? What, for that matter, makes any poetry worth reading?

Harold Bloom, the professor, critic and Shakespeare scholar, argued that Shakespeare broke from the literary tradition of his age and influenced ages to come because he “invented the human” – wrote characters with rich, complex, flawed personalities. His plays weren’t allegories or morality tales; they captured what it is to be a human being living in this world and

relating to other human beings, and they did so with concentrated verbal power. Four hundred years later our poets are still attempting to do just that – distill human experience and feeling

through a concentrated form of language; language that escapes language.

Some have managed a wider audience than others. Some do more belly-button-staring, and so I suspect are off-putting, because showing what it is to be human isn’t necessarily the same as dragging the reader into your own personal abyss. Mary Oliver, who has some of the highest circulation numbers in our library, wrote that “poems begin in experience, but poems are not in fact experience, nor even a necessarily exact reportage of an experience.” I think she gets at what makes a poem enduring when she says (in “A Poetry Handbook”), “I like to say that I write poems for a stranger who will be born in some distant country hundreds of years from now...It reminds me, forcefully, that everything necessary must be on the page. I must make a complete poem... Not my poem, if it’s well done, but a deeply breathing, bounding, self-sufficient poem. Like a traveler in an uncertain land, it needs to carry with it all that it must have to sustain its own life — and not a lot of extra weight either.”

We hope you enjoy the poems you’ll be carrying away from the library this month. And incidentally, look for Shakespeare (Sonnet 113) in your bundle today, April 15.

Kaimi Rose Lum is assistant director at Snow Library.

