

Author to Author with Mindy Friddle: Arthur McMaster

As a retired U.S. Army reserve officer and former Special Operations official, Arthur McMaster has found it “ironic” that his poetry has become much more political over the past few years. “I suppose our tragic administration in Washington has done me some good,” he said. In fact, McMaster labored for many years in the “national intelligence community” before turning to poetry. After serving as Chief of the Joint Intelligence Center for Special Operations, he retired in 2002, earned an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Florida, and moved to Greenville, intent on focusing on writing poetry and teaching.

Now the award-winning poet has achieved both goals—teaching at USC Upstate, Greenville Tech, and Furman Continued Education, before landing at Converse, where he is currently an adjunct professor. His poems have been published in a number of literary magazines such as *Southwest Review*, *Subtropics*, *Vox Journal*, *Emrys Review*, *The Marlboro Review*, *Rattle*, *The Santa Fe Review*, and *The North American Review*. His recent nomination for the Pushcart Prize is a milestone for any writer, though McMaster remains modest about being nominated for an annual award considered representative of “the present and future of America’s arts and letters” by Kirkus Review. “I am not even close,” McMaster said. “I think I got lucky.”

The Pushcart Prize recognizes exceptional poetry, fiction, and literary essays. Nominations come from small press publishers. McMaster’s poem, “Because She Had Gone Through All the Plum Wine,” published in *Vox Journal* (Oxford, Mississippi) was nominated. “This is a poem from a new chapbook... about people coming out from under the communist yoke in the Czech and Slovak lands. It is probably a bit surreal, but then so was the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. That’s the point.”

In addition to poetry, he writes essays and plays. “I write when I feel I have to write, when the urge is too strong to resist. That can be any time of the day or night. My stageplays take a lot of time and I have to set aside fairly large chunks of it for that kind of writing. Poetry, on the other hand, is an immediate sanctuary for me.”

His poetry criticism “helps me to better see and understand what is being published now.” He has strong opinions about the direction of contemporary poetry. “If poetry is going to appeal to a broader base of readers, and I want it to, we have to write something people can identify with. That’s not to say that the well-tuned sonnet is not a delight, but pretty much all of America’s poets laureate over the past decade or two write *vers libre*. They write on universal themes and they write to share and connect with their readers.”

He is seeking publication of his recently completed manuscript, *Musical Muse: Wives and Lovers of the Great Composers*, a book that “tells of the inspirational role of some hundred or so lovers, mostly female, who inspired some of our favorite

classical music." Meanwhile, he writes and sends out poems to literary magazines, "usually three or four poems at a time. I have maybe a dozen poems out now. I usually get maybe 20 percent accepted. The others go back into the Needs Revising stack." And he reads. A lot. "I don't know of any successful writers who do not love to read. I try to read everything." A Saul Bellow fan, ("Bellow has made many people writers, or want to be"), McMaster also advises aspiring writers to "Observe. That's critical. No truly good writers are lazy in detail. Their observational powers are keen." And along with inspiration, a poet's perspiration--his edits—are crucial. "Be a critical self-editor. Most poetry that doesn't get published is unfocused. It wanders. Advice: Let the reader do some work. Leave something unsaid. That's the door into the poem."