

Burlington Free Press: Living

Published: Sunday, April 16, 2006

***Sounds of Philadelphia* by Sally Pollak, Free Press Staff Writer**

His first poetry paycheck was for \$500. It was paid to the order of Major Jackson by Gwendolyn Brooks, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet.

Jackson, 37, is a poet and associate professor of English at the University of Vermont. He was a young writer working at an arts center in Philadelphia, his hometown, when he and a friend gave Brooks a ride from Philadelphia to New York City. Driving north on the New Jersey Turnpike, they talked about poetry, language and the Black Arts Movement.

When Jackson dropped Brooks at her hotel, she asked: "Are you leaving now?"

Yes, he told her.

"Meet me at the library later tonight," she said. "I want you to read a poem before my lecture."

At the New York Public Library, Jackson and his friend read a poem. Brooks got out her checkbook and wrote each man a check for \$500.

In his new poetry collection, "Hoops," Jackson hearkens back to that moment, and to a larger literary tradition, in the volume's major poem, "Letter to Brooks," a 68-page work that honors and speaks to the late poet. The poem is written in several sections, each named for a station on a Philadelphia subway line. Jackson said he was interested in writing about Philadelphia as Brooks, in her poetry, had written about Chicago.

"I feel a huge kinship with her project," he said. "She did an amazing job of creating a portrait of black Chicago — and thus Chicago."

He was inspired, also, by Auden's "Letter to Byron." Finally, Jackson had his own very personal reasons for creating a poetic dialog with Brooks. "She made a very generous gesture when I was young," he said. "This letter comes out of a very practical place of wanting to say, 'Thanks.' "

Readers familiar with Philadelphia will find particular delight in the poems in "Hoops." It is full of wonderful references to, and insights about, the city. A portrait of the place and its people emerges from its pages, with treasures tucked away and revealed on subsequent readings. Jackson hopes his rendering of Philly provokes people to think "a little more critically and reflexively about their communities," he said.

"There is a quest to capture beauty, of course, and give a lens on the humanity of the people that occupy that particular space," Jackson said. There is a quest, also, to compel readers to "think about the large subjects of race and language and how language perpetuates certain cliched attitudes," Jackson said, "but also can heal and propel us to new ways of thinking."

'A gifted poet'

Jackson moved to Vermont four years ago to teach at UVM. He lives in South Burlington with his wife and two sons. "Hoops," whose title is meant to "hook 'em in," is Jackson's second poetry collection. The first, "Leaving Saturn" (2002), is a critically acclaimed book that was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

"I'm attracted to the possibilities of the relationships between words," Jackson said recently in his office at UVM. "How they pun; how they illuminate each other; their etymological roots.

"I understand how certain (poetic) conventions are cast as nostalgic and hearken back to a time that was simpler. My approach is: I know where my politics stand. I value symmetry. I value sound. I value a certain kind of organic order. ... It's a magical thing that happens when you hear two words that sound alike and you detect a relationship: whether it's political or purely aesthetic."

In lively, interesting language and strong rhythms, his poems describe the landscapes and people of North Philadelphia and Germantown, Philadelphia neighborhoods where Jackson grew up. He is one of two brothers, the son of a counselor and telephone company employee.

He writes about his grandfather making a garden in the city; about watching a basketball player with "Elbows posed like handlebars." Later, in the poem, the book's title piece, Jackson writes: "Four years later, he's off/on scholarship to UNC/I'm to study Nabokov/at state's university." In another poem, part of "Letter to Brooks," Jackson describes in rhyming (Frost-like) verse, trying to write poetry at "The Frost Place."

"Major Jackson is a fascinating and gifted poet," wrote the critic and writer Jay Parini by e-mail. He is in London, on sabbatical from his teaching position at Middlebury College.

"He has a remarkable sense of rhythm, and his poems are systems of cleverly linked sounds: words colliding, bouncing off each other, in rhyme and slant rhyme, with lots of internal echoes," Parini wrote. "He has an ear for the speech of the streets, and this ear plays well in the lines, which have a wonderful bounce. He's a very smart guy, well-read in the traditions of English and American poetry. But he knows the tradition of African-American poetry very well, too, and all of that plays together in the work."

A side of Nabokov

If the player called "Radar" in Jackson's "Hoops" poem received a basketball scholarship at UNC, Jackson didn't completely study Nabokov at state's university.

He did attend Temple University, a state university in North Philadelphia, after graduating from Central High School, the nation's second oldest public high school. Jackson was a sophomore at Central, an academic magnet school, when it admitted girls after almost 150 years as a boys school. His enduring image of the change: roses in the urinals.

At Temple, Nabokov came on the side: Jackson majored in accounting. He also studied English, and remembers with fondness his literature courses with the poet Sonia Sanchez. "That's where I became super-interested," he said.

Jackson so enjoyed these classes, he lost track of the fact that he had enough credits to graduate. Writing poetry was, in those days, a "closeted activity." He was writing rhymes with the thought of being a rapper. (These influences and interests are apparent in his poetry.)

After graduation, Jackson made use of his major: He was hired by the Painted Bride Art Center to be its finance director. At 24, he was in charge of the \$1.8 million budget of a Philadelphia cultural institute, a center that presents dance, jazz, theater, poetry and more.

Jackson was fired after a year, but he maintained a relationship with the center as its poetry curator even as other work brought him to New England, where he was a member of the Dark Room Collective, a group of African-American poets.

It was at the [mkw: mo added:]Bride, in late 1994, that he completed on deadline his application for a Pew Fellowship in the Arts. Jackson applied for the grant in about a day: writing three essays and selecting samples of his work surreptitiously at an accounting job in Boston. He drove the application down to Philly at the last minute, wrapping it up at the Bride.

He brought it to Pew's downtown offices at "five of five" the day it was due. "I got in the elevator, dropped it off and forgot about it," he said.

About six months later, Jackson learned he was the recipient of a \$50,000, two-year fellowship. He quit his accounting job. He moved to a tree-lined street in his old neighborhood. He slept late.

"When I won that fellowship, I found myself laying in bed in the mornings," he said. "I was overwhelmed and flabbergasted that someone would pay me to write poetry." It had always been something he practiced at either end of a 9-to-5 job, "almost leisurely," he said. "And never with the idea that it would be of great value to anyone but me and my friends."

For three months, he didn't write. He used the money to buy books, many of which fill his shelves at UVM. He read a lot. He wrote a hip-hop column for a weekly paper in Philadelphia, keeping him in a writer's frame of mind. After a while, taking stock of the passing months, his accounting side kicked in: "I felt a little behind," he said. "And I never wanted them to think I was a fraud."

Power of tradition

Jackson would win further awards and fellowships, including one to the prestigious Bread Loaf Writers Conference at Middlebury College. There, he swam in swimming holes and walked Green Mountain paths. He relished working in a community of writers, including the poet Garrett Hongo, with whom he would pursue graduate studies at the University of Oregon.

His Vermont experience, and sense that local schools would be good ones for his kids, contributed to Jackson's accepting a faculty position at UVM four years ago. Living in Vermont, with its "mono-chromatic identity," is possible because Jackson thinks many people here are guided by principles of decency and social justice. This allows him to be optimistic about staying, he said. Jackson does have tentative plans to spend the coming academic year on a fellowship at Harvard/Radcliffe.

In his poetry seminar Tuesday,[spo: 4/11:] Jackson — after beginning with an impromptu couplet — talked about the gains and risks of writing formal versus free verse poetry.

"The best-case scenario," Jackson told his students, "is a poet who doesn't define himself, but looks at poetry as a big room in which you can occupy yourself at various times."

For the formal poet, there is the benefit of "writing in a tradition and borrowing the accumulated power of that tradition." This type of poet, has a "contract with the reader as a result of that familiarity." By contrast, the reader of a free verse poem has to make a "serious adjustment" in reading the work.

The writer who works in traditional form is, perhaps, freed by the very convention, Jackson said. "The poet sees form and convention as generative," he said. "The blank page is just too daunting."

But beware the "empty container." A poet might create the form, but fill it with water when he should be making wine. Worse yet, he might leave it empty.

Who are interesting, accomplished contemporary formalist poets? Jackson asked. He named Marilyn Hacker and Rafael Campo.

"I recommend Major Jackson," he said, flashing a big smile. "SikePsych. That's a joke."

You can find humor in his elegiac poetry, but "Hoops" is no joke.

Contact Sally Pollak at spollak@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com or 660-1859.

Nothing but net

Title: "Hoops"

Author: Major Jackson

Publisher: W.W. Norton & Company

Price: \$23.95

Jackson on his book's title: "That's to hook 'em in. It's also honoring a particular theme or motif within the book: felt dreams. A number of people turn to basketball as a means of transcending their condition.

"It's also to talk about hoops in terms of formal hoops I'm jumping through, any kinds of boundaries anyone has to go through."

Jackson on recent trips to Philadelphia: "I'm realizing with each trip how important it is for kids — ethnically and culturally — to be exposed to people of the world, people of color.

"Not just for their growth, but for a widening of their humanity. Without that expansive view of the world, they are crippled."