

Ruffin Named 2009 Texas Poet Laureate

By Julia May



He loves football, shooting, riding his tractor, keeping up his truck, and doing his own carpentry, electrical, and plumbing work, and he is a long-time member of the National Rifle Association—not exactly the stereotypical image of a person who also loves words and is a master of arranging them into beautifully crafted poems and other literary works.

“The fact is that anybody can write poems that can’t be understood. The challenge is to write poetry that can be understood and appreciated on one level and yet possess sufficient depth to appeal to a more critical audience, and that’s what I try to do.”

Yet, that is Paul Ruffin, a Texas State University System Regents’ Professor, a Distinguished Professor of English at Sam Houston State University, and now the 2009 Texas Poet Laureate.

The Texas Commission on the Arts announced Ruffin’s selection in May, along with its other appointees including 2009 State Musician Willie Nelson, of Austin; State Two-Dimensional Artist Rene Alvarado, of San Angelo; and State Three-Dimensional Artist Eliseo Garcia, of Dallas. According to the commission, the appointees were selected for their outstanding commitment to the arts in Texas.

“State artists demonstrate the essence of what art in Texas is all about,” Rep. Mark Homer, chair of the House of Representative’s Committee on Culture, Recreation and Tourism, said. “The work of these artists, and others like them, ensures that art and culture thrives in our great state, and we are pleased to honor these talented men and women with this recognition.”

Anyone who knows Ruffin knows that he is proud of his Southern roots. His experiences and the people he has met along the way often show up in his writings.

He was also influenced by the times he was required to attend church services as a youth.

“My love of poetry came from memorizing the lyrics from the Broadman Hymnal in church, something I did to keep from being bored absolutely to death,” he said. “I discovered that hymn beat and realized that I could plug my own words in and make a poem. Oh, I also started writing fiction in church: I’d rewrite all the Bible stories and give them a different ending.”

His ability to compose poems was soon apparent and provided him with an entrepreneurship opportunity as a schoolboy.

“I could rattle off a poem on practically any subject almost on command, a talent that came in handy at school, where classmates would hire me to write poems for them when they had to turn one in in English,” Ruffin

said. “I would charge a nickel or dime or quarter, depending on the length. I made pretty good spending money, probably more than I make off poetry these days.”

His first of many awards and recognitions came while he was still living in Mississippi, when he won first prize in a statewide poetry contest sponsored by the Mississippi Arts Commission. He was presented a check after reading some of his poems in the Old Capitol Building in Jackson.

“The best part about that whole thing though, was that (award-winning Mississippi author) Eudora Welty sought me out after my reading and told me how much she enjoyed my poems; she also said to me, ‘You look like a Florentine painting,’ which I never did understand but certainly liked,” Ruffin said. “I have an essay on that experience titled ‘The Lady with the Quick Simile.’”

After that, Ruffin began seriously sending poems out for publication. After landing a few in journals and magazines, he was encouraged to utilize his talent even more.

The author of more than 1,500 poems—he doesn’t know the exact number—Ruffin feels that poetry is often misunderstood, “mainly because too many poets like to be obscure,” he said.

“To be misunderstood is to be great, you know. The fact is that anybody can write poems that can’t be understood,” he said. “The challenge is to write poetry that can be understood and appreciated on one level and yet possess sufficient depth to appeal to a more critical audience, and that’s what I try to do.”

Although his sixth collection of poetry, entitled *Cleaning the Well: Poems Old and*

New was recently released, most of Ruffin’s efforts these days have ventured away from poetry. He has a new book of essays due out later this year, and five novels in different stages of development, and he also works on essays and stories “all the time.”

But even so, his older poems often find new life in his fiction and nonfiction prose.

“I find myself revising my older poems and occasionally writing a new one,” Ruffin said. “I often pull from them when I write an essay or a story.

“Back when I had a little cattle operation just outside Huntsville, I wrote a lot of dramatic poems about my experiences out there, and several of those poems became essays or stories,” he said. “I hope to have a collection of those dramatic poems out next year.”

Even though the Texas State Poet Laureate recognition brings a bit of celebrity status to Ruffin, he says he is not likely to change his lifestyle.

“Professionally I’ll go right on with my daily routine: working on *The Texas Review* or my own books,” he said. “The beat goes on—I work 12 months a year, right through summer and most breaks and most weekends, but it’s what I’m accustomed to, and I like it. Things won’t change much, except that I’ll be on the road a bit more.

“Life at the house will go on as usual,” he said. “I have plenty of projects to work on, the most pressing of which are wiring and building shelves in my new shop and designing an addition to the house, a game room.”

In other words, he’ll keep doing the things he loves. ★