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A Literary Activist  
Southern writer to bring the music of poetry to discussion, reading

Whether she is in a classroom or a car, a presentation or a conversation, Heather Dobbins is on a mission – a mission to make poetry a relaxing exploration rather than a high-pressure brain game.

“It’s sad and special about this juncture of our history as far as how people are reacting to poetry in our country,” says Dobbins, a Memphis native who has returned there to write and teach writing. “[Poetry] used to be so much more available in all of its kinds and experiments and genres, and it used to be more a part of daily life. Now, it’s kind of like how abstract art is to other people. They think, ‘I don’t get it,’ or they have some kind of horrible story in high school where someone was mean to them about how they interpreted a poem and they never got over it.

“I find that I’m doing a lot of damage control for poetry spontaneously while I’m writing it. I’m trying to get it back into good graces, as it should be.”

She calls herself a “literary activist,” working with teenagers in schools, camps and workshops and with writers, poets and listeners of all ages wherever she can take her message.

On Tuesday, Feb. 3, ETSU will be Dobbins’ mission field. She will lead a 4-5 p.m. roundtable discussion in D.P. Culp Center’s East Tennessee Room on the third floor, then present a 7 p.m. reading of her poetry in Ball Hall Room 127. A question-and-answer session and light reception in Slocumb Galleries will follow the reading. All of these events, co-sponsored by ETSU’s Mary B. Martin School of the Arts and the Department of Literature & Language, are free and open to the public.

Dobbins says she will read from her two books of poetry, In the Low Houses, published in 2014, and the recently completed River Mouth, and at the roundtable may share some of her drafts for the new poems to spur conversation. “For students, the process of a poem can be very mysterious and a lot of poets are a little too secretive about it,” she says. “They’re scared that if they talk about it, then it might not work anymore, whereas I am the opposite. I want to show you many different ways that I do something so that it can help you or maybe trigger something else that might help you.”
ETSU Literature & Language Professor and poet Dr. Jesse Graves will moderate the roundtable discussion for his friend and former classmate from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville College Scholars program.

“We taught high school and middle school students from Knoxville in this young writer’s workshop that UT sponsors,” Graves recalls, “and I always remember how Heather made the poetry seem just such a normal part of life … It doesn’t have to be about just the sort of monumental things, but it can be about whatever is happening in your life, whatever your wishes and wants and desires are. There is room for that in poetry.”

The ETSU events are tailored to convey that accessibility, Graves says, to make everyone feel welcome. “It’s sometimes a little intimidating after a poetry reading especially for a student who has not been to this sort of thing very much to ask a question during the Q&A session,” he says. “The roundtable is a little less formal and a little more inviting – sort of based on the fact that no one is standing on a stage, up in front. They’re sitting right there beside you. It makes it much easier to talk with them, and I think Heather will have a lot to say about writing, about how she teaches writing.”

People who would like to discuss poetry often feel pressure to sound expert, Dobbins says. “Don’t think of the poem as this riddle,” she says, “where everyone is going to laugh because you don’t know the answer … Let yourself have that experience and without getting overly analytical or intellectual about it or you’ll miss the good stuff of it.”

Dobbins’ poetry, too, is quite accessible and relevant to anyone who has an affinity for their roots and culture. “Heather has a strong connection to places,” Graves says. “She writes really beautifully about particularly her part of Tennessee, around Memphis … I have told my students, ‘Come to the reading to hear this really beautiful, musical language, this rich and highly textured language. But also for its richness of feeling in Heather’s work and for how much I think they will recognize that their own lives and their own experiences could transfer into these poems.’

Poetry, prose and words with lyrical content have often flowed for Dobbins in odd and eclectic locations. As a child growing up in Memphis, Heather Dobbins would ride her bike around the neighborhood concocting song lyrics as she listened to her Walkman. “They were very passionate and over-the-top …” Dobbins says. “I was just so full of these lyrics and rhymes and the sense of song.”

In high school, Dobbins made the transition from lyrics to lyrical words, and from the flute to poetry. The film *Dead Poets Society* was part of her inspiration. “I so longed for a Mr. Keating, but I didn’t have one,” she says. “So I would hold these Poetry Societies in my 1978 Oldsmobile … it was very large, the Oldsmobile.”

The pursuit of poetry and creative writing led her not only to University of Tennessee-Knoxville, but also to Holy Names University in Oakland, Calif., and Bennington College, Vt., for master’s degrees. Despite an expectation that she would become a college professor, Dobbins, while at UT, found her calling, in middle and high school classrooms. “It was a ruinous time,” she says
with wry humor. “That’s when I fell in love with teenagers … and how open and how hungry they were for poetry.”

She has now been teaching and encouraging young writers for 14 years, in California and back home in Memphis, where she founded River City Scribes, a creative writing workshop for teens.

“A really great poem will keep getting to you for years and years and years because it will have all those layers and those myriad interpretations, and for me, that’s endlessly enjoyable, and I love showing that to students. I love showing that to students and teaching them that.

“That’s part of my mission … I get to be a literary activist in that way.”


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