

National Poetry Month in Madison Will Explore the Diversity of Poetry

Madison Poet Laureate Oscar Mireles teaming up with Madison Public Library for a variety of poetry events

By **David Dahmer** - Mar 26, 2018



"I think sometimes when people think of poetry, they think of Beatniks and a little coffeehouse and five or six of their friends ... and that's poetry," laughs Oscar Mireles, the City of Madison's poet laureate.

"I think what we're trying to do is to expand what people think of poetry," he adds. "We have people reading poetry in a variety of places, we have poetry in the restaurants and poetry on the buses, we'll have poetry on the sidewalks. We will be opening the doors in so many ways so people can see poetry in a different light."





Mireles and the Madison Public Library are partnering to celebrate National Poetry Month with numerous events throughout the city beginning this Sunday, April 1.

Mireles is the first Latino to hold the position of Madison's poet laureate, a position he has held since January of 2016. He is also the first male since inaugural poet laureate John Tuschen left the post in 2000. Since 1977, five people have held the position.

"Being the poet laureate, it's all about building upon the work of all the other [previous] poet laureates did," Mireles says. "So, Fabu kind of organized the bus line poetry. Sarah [Busse] and Wendy [Vardaman] organized poetry in front of the City Council and helped set up the sidewalk poetry."



Oscar Mireles holds a copy of his book "I Didn't Know There Were Latinos in Wisconsin." (Photo by James Edward Mills)

By day, Mireles is the executive director and principal of Omega School, where he helps adults complete their GED/HSED. As a poet, one of his biggest claims to fame is being the editor of three volumes of "I Didn't Know There Were Latinos in Wisconsin," an anthology of works by Latino writers in the state. Like Fabu before him, Mireles is excited to bring diversity to the position of poet laureate.

"On my Facebook page a couple months ago, I asked people what their favorite poem was and it ranged from Maya Angelou to [UW First Wave student] Danez Smith. Somebody said the Gettysburg Address, others said Emily Dickinson. There's such an incredibly wide range of poetry, and I think that's important," Mireles says. "One of the things that we're going to do for the entire month of April is at the Madison Public Library website we're going to have a different person from the committee select their favorite poem and give a little blurb as to why."

Mireles is talking about a "poem a day" presentation throughout the month of April where daily poetry selections from a variety of writers will be featured. Mireles asked about 30 community members to contribute including Joy Cardin, former WPR host; Bob Miller, the former mayor of Monona; Jessica Doyle, former First lady of Wisconsin; Fabu, former City of Madison Poet Laureate, and more.





Fabu Carter. Photo by Martin Jenich.

"There will be a wide enough range of poems where everybody will feel like they are represented," Mireles says. "Diversity in poetry is important, so it's not just one kind of poem. There's such a wide range of poetry, so there's room to get under the big tent. People, especially young people, can see that there is space for them."

Other events that Mireles and the Madison Public Library have planned include:

- ◆ Mireles will be the featured writer on Friday, April 6 at the Greenbush Writers Collective (GWC), a new collaboration between the UW-Madison's Continuing Studies Writing Program and The Neighborhood House Community Center. The event features local writers for a reading of their work, followed by a brief discussion and Q & A regarding the craft of writing.
- ◆ Members of the public are invited to a special National Poetry Month kick off at Central Library on Saturday, April 7, 3-4:30 p.m. where Mireles will read poetry. "At the event, all of the former Poet Laureates [Fabu, Andrea Musher, and Wendy Vardaman] of Madison will read and the Poet Laureate of Wisconsin [Karla Huston] will also read poetry, too," Mireles says.





Poet Ali Muldrow

- ◆ On Tuesday, April 10, Mireles has invited poet Ali Muldrow to open the Madison Common Council meeting with a poem. Madison's Poets Laureate, or a poet they invite, occasionally open the Common Council with a poem. This act reinforces a mood of civility in discourse.

- ◆ Mireles will be reading at the Eat Local::Read Local reading to kick off National Poetry Month. The reading will be held at the local restaurant Pizzaman on Downer in Milwaukee on Tuesday, April 10, 6 p.m. Mireles's poem, "In 1976," is included in the 2018 Eat Local::Read Local program. During the month of April, Mireles's poem – along with the others in the series – will be distributed to restaurants in Madison and Milwaukee.

- ◆ Mireles and the former Poet Laureates of Madison will each have poetry embedded in the sidewalks in the new Monroe Street and Sidewalk Reconstruction. Mireles's poem "History of Monroe Street" will be included.

- ◆ Mireles will be reading from his children's book "Why Did You Name Me Javier, Dad?" at the Madison Children's Museum on April 22.

- ◆ At Madison Central Library on Monday, April 23, 5 p.m., there will be a public reception to honor the 25 writers selected for the Madison Metro Bus Lines Project. This year's theme was home. Writers responded to the theme of "What is that special thing (event, person, place) about Madison that makes you call it "home?" Selected poems were transformed into moving art by Edgewood College Graphic Design students. The reception will be followed by a screening of the poetry-related film Dead Poets Society.





Poet Laureate Oscar Mireles (far right) with last summer's Bus Line Poetry winners

Bus Lines, a signature project of the Madison Poet Laureate program started by former poet laureate Fabu, creates an opportunity for Madison residents to display their poems inside Metro Transit buses and brings poetry before city residents in a creative way.

"One of the things we did with the bus line poetry is that we made them little posters," Mireles says. "So it's kind of an exhibit and kids can't take their pictures with it so it's another element of poetry."

National Poetry Month is looking like it is going to be jammed packed for Mireles, but he wouldn't have it any other way.

"There's a poem I wrote called 'Hot Tamale.' President Ford was running for office in 1976 and they invited to a dinner and served him a tamale and he didn't open the husk – he just ate it," Mireles smiles. "So that became the great tamale incident. There's a group from Milwaukee that has this 'Eat Local::Read Local' and they will be featuring that poem I wrote 'Hot Tamale' at Cooper Tavern [on the Square.]

Poetry has been a powerful part of Mireles's life and he's happy to share it with people during National Poetry Month.

"I'm happy to be able to share it with other people. Putting this poetry month together, I'm just trying to add to what everybody else has added," Mireles says. "We created this event around National Poetry Month so the next poet laureate can have things already in place so that when they do it next year they won't have to re-invent the wheel ... but they can always add their own twists."

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