

A: Hello, and welcome to *We LOVE the Library*, a twice-monthly podcast brought to you by the San Luis Obispo County Library Foundation. I'm your host, Rachel Duchek. This fifth episode focuses on Poetry Night at the Los Osos Library and considers the role of poetry in our lives more generally. We begin by speaking to poetry fan Christine Ahern and Beverly Boyd, curator and organizer of Poetry Night, to learn about the origins and story of this special free community event. We then check in with librarian Rosalyn Willis, the library staff member who helps make Poetry Night happen. Finally, we hear from poet Lisa Kaufman, who graciously agreed to read a poem for our podcast that she read at the November 2025 Poetry Night. I hope you enjoy this episode as much as we've enjoyed putting it together. Thanks for supporting your public library. We're here with poetry fan Christine Ahern and Poetry Night coordinator and curator Beverly Boyd. Hi, Christine.

B: Hello, Rachel.

A: Hi, Bev, how are you?

C: Hi, Rachel. Hi, Christine.

A: So we're going to begin kind of doing a little reverse engineering. And Christine, we saw you at Poetry Night in the audience, and I don't believe you popped up to read one of your poems or anything like that. So you're a poetry fan. Can you tell us why you like poetry?

B: Well, I love poetry, and I've been reading poetry for most of my life, like a lot of people. I am so in awe of people who are brave enough to get up in front of a crowd and read their poetry. And I love hearing poetry read out loud, I think is a uniquely special experience. It's so much more heart and soul enriching to me than reading poetry. I wish I could have read Mary Oliver, heard Mary Oliver read out loud, or David White. I have heard David White read out loud, and it's always just a brilliant experience that I really enjoy. It's like the difference between reading a play and going to the theater. It is, and we have so many brilliant poets in our little community. It's just, it's mind-boggling, and the library gives these people such a special opportunity that, I don't

know, maybe they would never have any other way to get together and read their poetry out loud. And I am in awe of how brave they are.

A: Well, that's a great segue into, let's hear from you, Bev, about when did the poetry readings at the Los Osos Library begin, and who and what inspired them?

C: They began way back in 2010, because Bonnie Young, who lives in Arroyo Grande and was a Slough County Poet Laureate, is a member of a critique group to which I've belonged for 20 years. To celebrate Poetry Month, which is April, she organized us to print favorite poems, roll them up, tie them up with a ribbon, and take a basket of poems to our local libraries for patrons patrons to take and enjoy. When I took my basket to the Los Osos Library, Joe Lorenzi, the librarian then, was happy to participate, invited poets from our group to be featured readers at the Los Osos Library's first poetry reading. Then he asked me to set up the program in Los Osos. That was in April 2010, when Kevin Patrick Sullivan was Poet Laureate and curated many readings at other venues in the county. In addition, Jerry Douglas Smith curated one at Coalesce in Morro Bay for many years. Since 2010, Los Osos Library has usually sponsored four readings a year. On a quarterly basis, yes.

C: Usually, yeah. Yeah, I guess that's the way that would work out.

A: I'm a word person, not a numbers person, so. But this has been going on for 15 years.

C; Correct.

A: And it's, I'm, we're sitting here talking about Poetry Night because, frankly, I was blown away by the number of people who showed up on a rainy November night to the Los Osos Library. And it was standing room only. It was jam-packed. And the way that it works is the first half is poetry by professional poets who you've invited, and then there's an intermission, and then that's when people from the audience can pop up and read their own poems.

C: Correct.

A: So it was just really, it was really amazing, and I would invite anyone who's interested at all in poetry to put it on your calendar when you announce the next one for the 2026, when you're going to do something there perhaps in the winter, to make sure that you go, because it was really, it was really cool.

C: Oh, I'm so glad you enjoyed it.

B: I've always enjoyed it. I've been many times, and it's always a delight.

C: Thank you, Christine. Yes, you're a longtime attendee.

B: Yes, yes, and I look forward to it. I'm always so pleased. Bev will come into the bookstore and let me know, make sure I know when the next one is when it's coming up.

C: I have to find another book.

A: Yes, because you work at Volumes of Pleasure Bookshop.

B: I do, I work at Volumes of Pleasure Bookshop right here in Los Osos.

A: Right here in Los Osos. So why don't you tell us from your perspective in the audience what you thought about the second half of the night when the audience members and the public popped up and went up to read their poems. What did you like about that?

B: I love about that, and what I said earlier is I love that people are that brave, because I don't think I could do it, and it's a joy to see the variety. You know, people who do rhyming poetry, and people who do things that are more esoteric, and people that do things that are funny, and things that are heartfelt, and you get a huge variety, and you kind of get a little sense of your people in your community, because you do get a sense of who these people are through their poetry, like you would with any poet, get a sense of who they are through their poetry.

A: And it's a different kind of experience than when you're just talking to somebody or chatting in the grocery store line. It's like somebody's opening their soul to you when they get up to read. Isn't that right, Bev?

C: Often.

A: Well, I would agree. It was really such a wide range of poetry that we were hearing that night. So now we had the pandemic, and I'm sure that that threw off your poetry night schedule and status quo. Can you tell us what happened during the pandemic with Poetry Night?

C: Well, we were able to do something different, and we met on Zoom for all those years, and it was mainly because there was a tech-savvy librarian named Eric Johnson. And in that way, I could invite poets who were out of the state and out of the country. For example, Mira Rosenthal, a Cal Poly professor, was on a Fulbright in Poland. And Kathy Fagan, a former professor at Cal Poly, who was co-founder of MFA program at The Ohio State University, they read from us from Poland in Ohio. And both made personal sacrifices in sleep deprivation for the time change, especially Mira, all the way from Poland.

A: That's great. It must have been because poetry was important to share during that time.

C: I think it helped people a lot to be able to connect that way because it could be really lonely otherwise.

A: Right. Yes. Well, that's wonderful. Now, we are fortunate to have Lisa Coffman. After our conversation here, we'll be airing a poem by her.

C: Excellent.

A: And can you tell us about some of the featured artists who you've had? She was reading in the first half of the evening, and we've asked her to read one of her poems from Tennessee. We'll see if... Yes. Or whatever she wants to read.

C: If it's the one about her mother, it is just awesome. And I should say that Kathryn de Lancellotti was reading that night too. And both of them, I think there were more people who attended that night than ever before. And we've had as many as 63, but this was uncountable.

A: There was easily over 100 people milling about in the library, and many of them could not get a seat because it was so packed.

C: Yes.

A: Well, who else have been some of the poets who've come to read at Poetry Night?

C: People who have been from farther away than Los Osos or San Luis Obispo. Lisa Allen Ortiz came from Santa Cruz. Lance Lee came from LA. Glover Davis came from Texas.

A: Wow.

C: And we've had a lot of Santa Barbara poets, and so it's just wonderful that they're willing to come so far just for a night. I know one person, Chris Buckley, we ran way over time because the open mic took so long, and he had three hours to drive back to Santa Barbara late at night, so he was quite a hero.

B: He was very good. I enjoyed him a lot. He's come multiple times all that way.

C: But if I'm mentioning people, I really need to mention the librarians, because Joe Lorenzi started it. Then Victoria Hewson, who was a librarian for a long time, supported us. Kristen Nibby, who's now in Morro Bay. Eric Johnson, I mentioned, and Bonnie Richan and Rosalind Willis are the people who are helping us now. But I should mention that all the libraries help to prepare for the evenings by setting up chairs, many chairs, and then they have to take them down the next day. But they're even cheerful about it, so it's just quite an amazing group. They really make it happen.

A: Every librarian who I have spoken with for this podcast loves their job. They love working at the library, and so it's a type of care for your community, is to provide library service.

C: Yeah, they really welcome us, and it's really nice.

A: That's awesome. I want to ask you, Christine, do you have some favorite poets or poems? I'm putting you on the spot. I didn't give you this ahead of time.

B: I do have favorite poets, and I will mention Mary Oliver, who I think is a lot of people's favorite poet. We sell a lot of Mary's books at the bookstore. David White, he's Irish, and I love Irish poetry. Irish poets have a really deep resonance, I think, with soul. And then someone who I recently discovered was Andrea Gibson, who I'm sorry I discovered only after her death, but

she's, if anybody has a chance to hear her read her poetry out loud, it's absolutely brilliant. I have a couple of her books, but to hear her speak her poetry is really brilliant, and I think right now those are probably my three favorite poets, and they're all living. No, Mary Oliver is no longer living, but David White, and no, he's the only one who's still living.

A: Yes, well you have a mix...

C: and you have their words.

A: Yes, so you can stay connected to that person beyond their death. Now your list of favorite poems might be from a little bit of an older time period, Bev. Who are some of your favorite poets?

C: Oh my, okay, from earlier periods, I think John Donne, George Herbert, John Milton, but I'm really enjoying Marie Howe whenever she brings out another book, Sharon Olds, and sadly I think Tony Hoagland has died, and Billy Collins, Natasha Trethewey is really wonderful, and Amanda Gorman.

A: Oh yeah, the poet who read at the Biden inauguration.

C: "The Hill We Climb," I love that poem. So there's just so many people, and there's so many people in the community here who are practicing poets, and people are publishing, and people are coming to these gigs, and I should say other poetry readings in the county include several venues in SLO, especially since Caleb Nichols, who's at Cal Poly, became current poet laureate, and if you're interested in finding all the gigs that he's sponsoring, you might google Book Bike.

A: Book Bike.

C: Book Bike, I'm not sure the exact address, but and he announces them, and then there's another venue now in Morro Bay, used to be Jerry Douglas Smith, who ran a reading at Coalesce for years, but that I think is now at a cafe, a different reading, a different sponsor.

A: So how does the public learn about the readings?

C: Well, there's a library newsletter, and that comes out if you're on their email list, and it's on the county website actually, and the Arts Council online newsletter is another place that they mention it, and I email flyers to people all over the county and beyond

who wish to be placed on that list, and I tack up posters on bulletin boards and kiosks around town, and these are designed by Dave Bolas and are beautiful because they're based on often his own photography, and so the emails and the posters announce the date and the featured readers and the evening's theme, and the theme last time with our last two readers was "liminal spaces," and one need not be bound by it, but some people like to be inspired by a concept that might help them decide what poetry they might read in the open mic. So those are ways. Also, another way to resource poetry, not about the readings, but former poet laureate Jeannie Greensfelder emails poems several days a week to those who sign up with her, and she's given me permission to give you her email address, which is jeanniegreensfelder at gmail.com, although Jeannie in this case, her real name is J-E-A-N-I-E, but her email is G-E-N-I-E Greensfelder at gmail.com, and she'll send you several poems a week, and they're really good poems, so that's another way you can get involved with poetry.

A: Wonderful. Bev, Christine, I really appreciate you sitting with us to explain Poetry Night and speak more generally about the importance of poetry and how the libraries can be a good source for poetry and discovering new poets, as well as hearing poetry performed.

C: We're very fortunate to have all those librarians support the community in the way they do.

B: We are, and to have the library that we have in our little town of Los Osos.

C: And your bookstore, which is really wonderful. It all works together. It takes a village, as they say. Thank you so much for sitting with me.

B and C: Thank you, Rachel.

A: We're here with Rosalind Willis, who is a librarian at the Los Osos Library. Hi, Rosalind.

D: Hi.

A: And you're this member of the staff who has taken on caring for Poetry Night and helping to make Poetry Night happen, because it happens after hours when the library is closed. Can you tell us a little bit more from your professional librarian experience of Poetry Night?

D: Yeah, so Poetry Night has been a really great way for all different poets from the community, whether they're not super experienced and then really accomplished poets, to come out and share their poems, which I feel like in a sleepy town like this, it's kind of a rare opportunity for people to be able to come and share that. And sometimes it's very vulnerable. And I feel like we have created sort of in Bev too, because she's just so kind and open to people. I feel like people really sense that it's an open, non-judgmental place for them to share. So that really means a lot to me, to be able to provide that platform for people in our community.

A: That's great. We were both out speaking before we started to record how blown away we were by how many people showed up.

D: Yes.

A: In November.

D: Yeah, yeah. I mean, we actually had to order more chairs, because we were like, well, I was pulling chairs out of the closet. I mean, people just kept coming in and it was like, okay, I think we're done now. Nope, we're not done. People just kept coming through the door.

A: What do you think that means? It's been a little while since there was Poetry Night, but are we at a time in our world where poetry seems important, more important than normal?

D: I think so. I think, you know, people are feeling a lot of different things right now. And there's a lot of things coming to a head. And I think that people want to respond to that and, you know, find like-minded people in the community as well. So, and I think it's a great way for that to take place.

A: And it was wild to be in that room with all those brave people popping up to read their poems and open their souls, you know,

to strangers. It was really, it's really quite something different than just picking up a book and reading a poem.

D: Yes, definitely.

A: Being part of a full experience.

D: Yeah, yeah.

A: Can you speak to, you've been doing this for a couple of years?

D: Poetry Night, yes. Well, actually it's been a year or so, I think, for Poetry Night, but two years at the library. Yeah.

A: Yeah. And what is your background?

D: I went to art school.

A: Art school.

D: Yes, at UCLA.

A: And how does that make you perfect for working at the library?

D: Well, there's a lot of creativity, I feel like, in my job. You know, coming up with programming and just being kind of open-minded to individuals that come in from different backgrounds. You know, that's also helpful. You know, I did a lot of, through my art practice, kind of research and looking through kind of diverse backgrounds and, you know, what art means and all this stuff. And I feel like that helps me interact with the public and with different people from all over.

A: Super cool. I have to tell you that I had never noticed the paintings up by the ceiling.

D: Oh, yeah. Well, they're different all the time.

A: Oh, they are. So I'm sitting there in the, I've managed to get myself a chair. And so, because I got there a little early, and I'm looking around, just waiting for the poetry to start. And I'm like, oh, I have never noticed that before. So putting yourself out there a little bit and being part of community and looking around with fresh eyes. And I'm excited for everyone to hear this poem coming up next from Lisa Coffman. And it was one of the poems that she read that night. And I really liked it a lot. Talking about rain and the river and nature. It's really powerful.

D: Yeah.

A: Great. Well, thank you for telling us about Poetry Night from your perspective. And I have one last question for you, which is, oh, no, I have two questions for you.

D: Okay.

A: Do you have favorite poems or poets?

D: A couple of my favorite poets are C.A. Conrad.

A: I've never heard of that person.

D: Yeah, they are very different, sort of getting you to think about the world in a different way. And they give you sort of prompts in a way, at least the book that I've read that I have. It's definitely different kind of poetry. And then Anne Sexton is also a classic, but I really love her poems.

A: She's intense.

D: Very intense.

A: Yeah.

D: But yeah, very powerful. So great.

A: Great. And okay, now here's my final question. What do you love about the library?

D: It's hard because I really love so many things about the library. I mean, at our particular library, I feel so lucky every day with all the patrons that come in because they're so kind and they're so grateful to just have this place to come to. And seeing all, you know, the young kids come for story time to the elderly, you know, people that maybe don't get to be around a lot of other people. It's really special to even see those different generations making bonds. And it's like, it just feels like such a, I mean, people say this all the time, but it's like the living room of the community. And that's how it feels so much of the time there. And people are coexisting. And, you know, there's people that come in and wear headphones, because they know that kids come through there and they're loud. And it's just really nice to see that everyone can just coexist and get to know each other in this just no pressure kind of space. Yeah.

A: Awesome. We love this library. Yeah.

D: It's a special one.

A: And I wanted to tell you that I have really appreciated being able to talk to you as I come in to pick up my books and do research for this podcast. And I'm stealing some of your lines. Like last episode, episode four, we talked to Susie Reddy of the Moro Coast Audubon Society.

D: Oh, cool.

A: And I told her about the plant swap that you all told me about.

D: Yeah. It's a favorite. I love it too. Yeah, I got some plants then.

A: I just keep thinking of that person who came in with like a bucket of air plants, and everyone got an air plant. What a great story. Thank you so much, Rosalind, for sitting to speak with me about Poetry Night and poetry in general, and how much we all love the library.

D: Of course.

A: Coming up next on *We LOVE the Library*, poet Lisa Coffman shares with us one of her poems connecting to her time living in Tennessee.

E: I'm Lisa Coffman. This poem is about a lake behind the house in Tennessee where I grew up, Appalachian, Tennessee, which is to say, East Tennessee. The lake is really part of a river, a long river that flows out of Virginia into Tennessee, and at several points is dammed and takes the name. The river becomes lakes that take the name of the dams, Melton Hill Lake, Watts Bar Lake. But the name is The Clinch. It also, in its long route, is heavily polluted in places. It was the site of a billion-gallon coal ash spill in 2008 from a steam plant in my county, a coal-burning steam plant in my county. And it also flows past the Oak Ridge National Lab where components of the atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were assembled. So it's heavily impacted, this lake, river, by so much human activity, and yet it is so lovely.

This is a poem in three parts. It's called "Pelewa thiipi, Three Views." The Pelewa thiipi is a much more ancient name of the

river taken from an indigenous people who lived along it, the Pelewa.

The poem is in three parts. "Pelewa thiipi, Three Views." This is for Carol Ferguson.

One. When the blue eye of the lake looks at sky, then the sky reveals its deep reaches. No zero, no void empty of mercy, but a bluebird pleasure, color of the robe given the Madonna, she who gazes on all as it is and holds this.

Two. When the lake scuds cloudy dark agate, then it remembers it is a river held back by the stone commandment of dam, above fattening shadows of gone fish, and the soft mud where strontium, cesium, weep their half-lives and won't go out.

Three. When the river wears its raiment of wind, diamond light, cottonmouth wake, willow leaned over herself, osprey dive, and the rain, and the rain, oh whole body under touch, oh river wide open.

A: Awesome. So good.

E: Thank you. Thank you for having me read it. This beloved river, this beloved river lake of my youth that I didn't even understand.

A: That's why we get older, so we can figure some of these things out.

E: So we can see.

A: Yeah.

E: And love, I think.

A: Yeah.

E: I think our hearts get better. I think.

A: Thank you so much, Lisa.

E: You're welcome.

A: I was so excited when you agreed. I was excited when I thought like, you know what? I'm gonna see if she would be

willing to read us something for our library podcast. And we really appreciate you.

E: Oh, I'm honored.

A: Adding your voice to this podcast. And I wanted to ask you before we stop recording, if you can tell us a little bit about your thoughts about the library.

E: Oh my gosh. I mean, they're my happy places, right? They have been all my life. Elementary school, which was not a happy place. But the library, the magic library, and the librarian, and the way into all these worlds, always have been. And I think the Los Osos Library, so my hometown library now, it's just such a wonderful place. It's not an institutional space. I know it belongs to the institution of government, but it is a community space. And you go in there and you find great reads. And you find people who will help you advise on great reads and have set them out, you know, on the bookshelves that you see kind of on display. But there are also all these other great resources there that I wouldn't have known about. I dropped my voting ballots off there. I have watched movies that I've checked out there. I just learned about these Explorer Backpacks with passes to the park. And of course, of course it would be there. I think that it's, I don't know, it just feels like abundance.

A: Ah, and the good sense of abundance, where things are free at the public library. I refer to it as the people's champion.

E: Yeah.

A: And I also see the library as like an imagination portal that you can either go in there and get some tools on how to write poetry or make a movie or any sort of creative thing for yourself. But you can also dip into the brains of other people who've recorded their artistry to share.

E: So it's a very, it's a very welcoming space. And I think specifically, the Poetry Series run out of the Los Osos Library has, again, this deep community feel, this big group, very dedicated to writing. You'll get some of the most present listening. And here's some of the most wonderful stuff in the open reading. So it's just really special all around. Abundance.

A: It's so, it's so great. And how wonderful to have someone who was up there in front for the first half of the Poetry Night to be able to come back and give us a little bit more insight into your love for the library, because we love it too.

E: Thank you so much, Rachel.

A: Thanks, Lisa. Lisa, if people want to know more about your writing and your work, where can they go?

E: I have a website, lisakoffman.com, L-I-S-A-C-O-F-F-M-A-N dot com. And that will make me update that website, but you can find me, you can find works, you can find books.

A: Yeah, thank you.

E: Yeah, thank you so much for having me. Thank you, library.

A: At the end of 1992, when I was 22, I moved to Washington, D.C. to live with some friends, and I little suspected that poetry would play such an outsized role in my experience of our nation's capital. I secured a receptionist job at the impressive Folger Shakespeare Library on Capitol Hill and spent the workday surrounded by literature from Shakespeare's era, approximately 1564 to 1616. I also attended the 1993 inauguration of Bill Clinton and heard Maya Angelou deliver her amazing poem, "On the Pulse of Morning," on that cold yet sunny January morning.

It was a moment that I will always remember, even if I was standing so far away that I couldn't make out her face at the microphone, but her voice was strong and powerful. I carry the energy of it with me even 33 years later. No time machine necessary to hear her voice again, however, because today I can use the Libby app and the SLO County Library collections to listen to Dr. Angelou read her deeply felt memoirs, including *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, highly recommended.

Do you have a relationship with a poem or an affection for a particular poet? Have you experienced poetry recently? How is poetry in your life? Do you write poetry? Do you want to try? Poetry is a feast for our minds and souls. I think it's good for you.

The best part? To access a treasure trove of poetry resources at your public library, all you need is your library card.

If you're interested in any of the poets mentioned in this episode, you can find a complete list of them on the accompanying episode post at SLOLibraryFoundation.org. We hope you're learning more about your public library and enjoying our *We LOVE the Library* podcast. Next time, we'll speak with Jackie Kinsey, Outreach Coordinator for the SLO County Library System. We had planned to include this interview with Jackie in episode five, but Poetry Night required more time and coverage.

In our sixth episode, Jackie will explain the difference between a bookmobile and a mobile library, describe the library by mail program for homebound adults, and highlight several other ways she's helping bring the library to all of us through the Branch Out program. Then, we'll meet Jay Capel, the newest member of our SLO County Library Foundation Board of Directors. We'll learn about his work with libraries when he was living in the greater Los Angeles area, and why and how he wants to continue to strengthen people's connection to the public library.

Finally, our Library Foundation President, Julianne McAdam, will highlight a special Library Foundation project that helped honor Francis Margaret Milne, the first librarian of the San Luis Obispo Library. The Library Foundation and the SLO County Library staff worked together to raise the funds to install a proper headstone for this important person in San Luis Obispo's intellectual history. The next episode drops in two weeks on New Year's Eve.

In the new year, if you are interested in sharing an idea about libraries with our community via this podcast, send us an email: podcast@slolibraryfoundation.org. That's s-l-o-libraryfoundation.org. If you want to support the public library financially, we have links on our website for one-time and recurring donations, and that's at slolibraryfoundation.org slash

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T-shirts, tote bags, mugs, and even baby onesies. Your library merch purchase helps us continue to enhance library collections and support library events. Find these items and more at the SHOP tab on our website.

Thank you for listening and for helping support the public library, the people's champion.