

Word of Mouth

News from People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos

Vijay Seshadri's "false starts" grow to prized poems

The first book that made an impression on Vijay Seshadri was an abridged, richly illustrated edition of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. In high school, teachers presented song lyrics, from The Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby" or Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence," as examples of contemporary poetry.

And by the time Seshadri—who was born in India and came to the United States at age five—was a 20-year-old Oberlin graduate hitchhiking to California to join the counter-culture, he'd discovered the anti-war poems of Galway Kinnell, along with the work of W.H. Auden, Theodore Roethke and John Ashbery.

"I'd skipped a couple of grades; I was very much an isolated child," Seshadri recalls. "In those days, children like myself, we read. We steeped ourselves in our imagination and an alternative life."

Seshadri's family expected him to become a doctor or an engineer. "Life had a lot of pressure for them, as immigrants in a very foreign land in which they had no real cultural markers. They had a kid who basically turned into a hippie...By the time I settled down and said I wanted to become a writer, they were grateful."

Seshadri returned from the west coast to earn his MFA from Columbia University. His collection, *3 Sections*, won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize in poetry. He now directs the graduate non-fiction writing program at Sarah Lawrence College. He will share his work at the People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos benefit on April 20.

Seshadri began writing poetry as a teenager. At Oberlin, instructors praised his work. He also found encouragement in the words of classic poets. "I read Yeats and felt it belonged to me as much as it did to Yeats," he said. "I read widely and

deeply...and found all sorts of people who I was really excited by."

For Seshadri, writing a poem is a process of both construction and discovery. "I get a phrase in my head, and I don't know where it comes from. Sometimes it leads immediately to a full-blown poem. Mostly, I have to start groping to figure out what it was...There can be a lot of false starts. You have to believe that there's a destination and that you're working toward it."

Some of Seshadri's work includes hairpin turns of plot, tone or diction: from flowery, Latinate language to sudden slang, from first-person narration to third. In "The Descent of Man" and other pieces in *3 Sections*, Seshadri was interested in "up-ending the poem once I got into it. I like trying to figure out how to mingle high and low diction."

Seshadri formerly worked as a copy editor at *The New Yorker*, a publication notorious for its stringent editorial oversight. "Copy-editing is...a very satisfying way of approaching language: fixing things, making sentences flow," he said. The lessons lingered. "I can never not be someone who has this little copy editor on my shoulder, sitting there as I'm writing. It might have limited my productivity, but it gave great clarity to the writing."

Seshadri's current projects include "a couple of essays, a bunch of poems, a set of translations from Urdu, which I learned as an adult." What unites the work is a search for coherence, an imaginative ordering of even the grimmest moments.

"I write dark poems, and I really enjoy dark poems," he said. "But however dark the material is, [as a writer] you're saying, 'It has this meaning. It has order.' Just by the act of the imagination, like making a story out of something, you're giving order to disorder. That is a leap of faith, I think."

The People & Stories benefit featuring Vijay Seshadri is open to the public. Invite colleagues, neighbors and members of your book club! Details and tickets available at www.peopleandstories.org

New evaluations can clarify impact of P&S sessions

by Rachel Epstein

Since the founding of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos in 1972, the wings of the program have been the testimonials it generates. Participants speak of their experiences reading and interpreting literature in a collaborative, trusting group, and this word of mouth propels the program to new places. Even as early as the 1970s, however, we have known that evidence of the program's impact could not be only anecdotal.

While personal stories are valuable in communicating the pedagogical effectiveness of the texts we read, reliance on testimonials alone leaves gaps: Who benefits most from the program, and in what ways? What is it about the stories that provokes enthusiasm and insight? What elements of the program methodology elicit these responses?

In 2012, founder Sarah Hirschman and Executive Director Patricia Andres engaged Danielle Allen, then at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, to develop a new program evaluation that might capture some of the more ineffable results of the methodology. Since then, Allen has become James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard University, and as the principal investigator for Harvard's Democratic Knowledge Project has assembled a research team focused on the improvement of humanities assessment.

Working as the Humanities and Liberal Arts Assessment (HULA) lab, these researchers are studying five humanities programs around the country, with the goal, in Allen's words, to "formalize the craft knowledge of humanists and the self-understandings of successful students so as to provide clearer answers to the questions of the kinds of impacts on human beings that are achieved by means of a humanistic education." We collaborate with Allen and co-researchers Maggie Schein and David Kidd to tailor our evaluations so that they best calibrate the impact of the program.

As participants in the national HULA

project, we have been heartened by the identification of finely tuned evaluation categories as significant and measurable. The HULA researchers have given attention in their assessment to web-like relationships among interpersonal, intellectual, and personal growth domains, among others, illustrating how the reading of a piece of fiction can set off a process of growth in many connected directions.

"What is it about the stories that provokes enthusiasm?"

These categories are keyed not just to multiple-choice responses in the participant evaluations, but also to short answers to open-ended questions. So, for example, when a participant writes on the evaluation form, "My favorite story was about the train because I felt the little girl feeling how much she loved her father," that participant is determined to have exhibited "cognitive analytical processing, advanced literacy, and literary appreciation." Such assessment validates the testimonials.

This kind of language also encourages us to name aspects of the education the program offers—for example, *appreciation* of literature and of peers' interpretations of that literature. We are able to draw conclusions not only about practical skills such as reading comprehension and public speaking, but also what we think of as the "soft skills" of aesthetic sensitivity, resilience and open-mindedness. All of this is promising to us as we put our energy into sustaining the program without compromising its identity and its priorities.

People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos participants are generally eager to give feedback on the program. In their evaluations, we learn what stories they really responded to and why, what aspects of the program they most connected with, and how they felt about interacting with their peers through the medium of literature. And ultimately, through our work with HULA, this anonymous feedback will contribute to a larger national conversation about the importance of the humanities.

"You're the only person I've ever met who can stand a bookstore as long as I can."

--Junot Díaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*

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P&S/GyC helps readers accept open-ended text

by Anndee Hochman

“What’s the moral of this story?” Amber wanted to know. We were reading “Chin,” by Gish Jen, a tale of family violence told through the eyes of an adolescent narrator.

The story ends with a scene that’s open to interpretation: Mrs. Chin and her daughter, who have fled the father’s violence, trudge back to their home, where Mr. Chin and his son stand at the kitchen blackboard, working out math problems.

Is this domestic tableau a sign that all is well again? Or an indication of just how stuck this family remains?

“These stories are like life,” I told Amber and other participants at Interim House, a women’s recovery center in Philadelphia. “They don’t have the kind of morals you can easily sum up.”

“Yeah,” Amber said. “I hate that.”

It’s not the first time such a conversation has occurred in a People & Stories group. Whether the readers are medical students in a Crossing Borders program, older adults in subsidized housing or youth living in a shelter, there is often a fluttering of pages when we come to a story’s final line: *Is that all? There’s no second chapter?*

In fact, the People & Stories canon seems to specialize in ambiguous endings:

- Louise Erdrich’s “The Shawl” concludes with a question that upends the entire first half of the story.
- “Fat,” by Raymond Carver, finishes with one character musing cryptically, “It is August. My life is about to change. I feel it.”
- Peter Cameron’s “Homework” ends with its young narrator posing a math challenge as a distraction from loneliness: “Find the value for n such that n plus everything else in your life makes you feel all right. Solve for n .”

For readers accustomed to a more mainstream literary diet, such opaque finales can feel exasperating. What, after all, is the author trying to say?

Our stories challenge readers to accept the idea that in literature, as in life, there are no facile answers. In fact, those moments of uncertainty are often the most fertile: a murk from which multiple possibilities can grow.

We re-read the moment in “Fat” when the overweight customer laments his voracious eating. “If we had a choice, no,” he says. “But there is no choice.” That led one woman to wonder aloud about the cascade of decisions and circumstances that had landed all of them in that room.

“These stories are like life,” I told Amber and other participants at Interim House, a women’s recovery center in Philadelphia. “They don’t have the kind of morals you can easily sum up.”

Did they “choose” their addictions? Were they at the mercy of bad genes or neglectful parenting? Did they “choose” to use drugs each time, without exactly “choosing” the outcome? Or did choice apply only to the first gulp of alcohol, the first needle in the vein?

In People & Stories, we learn—for instance, in “Thank You, M’am”—that a closed door doesn’t necessarily flag the end of a relationship. We learn to stumble together through the literary shadows. We learn to map the stories’ ambiguity to our lives. The young narrator of “Homework,” by Peter Cameron, “wants life to be like a math problem,” Kathy observed. “In math, the answer will always come.” Perhaps People & Stories can be a means to practice acceptance, a guide to making peace with unresolved questions and messy lives.

Is there something that would “solve for n ”? I asked. The women shook their heads. “It’s like recovery,” one said finally. “There’s no formula.”

“Stories are compasses and architecture, we navigate by them, we build our sanctuaries and our prisons out of them, and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice.”

--Rebecca Solnit

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P&S in 2017: growing access for new readers

by Patricia Andres

As I review our work in 2017, the words “depth” and “breadth” come to mind. We begin with the belief that powerful literature belongs to everyone, not just the privileged. We partner broadly with organizations that serve prisoners, people in re-entry, those in low-income housing, immigrants, at-risk youth, seniors, and adults enrolled in GED or English as a Second Language programs. Our work on the regional level is made possible by friends, donors and foundations. Our work on the national level, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, is implemented in partnership with libraries serving the groups we want to reach.

This year, we focused on “reading deeply in community,” the new tagline for all our programs. At Veterans Haven South in Berlin, N.J., participants wrote pieces based on their lives and their interpretations of works by Tim O’Brien, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes and others. And in Puerto Rico, where residents are still recovering from the hurricane’s devastation, a Gente y Cuentos participant said the group was the one bright spot on her horizon.

We are grateful to *all* our friends and supporters for making our work in 2017 possible.

2017 Service Report

Participants Served	650
Programs	52
Coordinator trainings	3
Coordinators	34
English programs	43
Spanish programs	9
Re-entry/prison sites	8
Youth programs	5
Senior programs	15
Homeless programs	7
Community groups	11
Veteran/recovery groups	6

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“Good work, like good talk or any other form of worthwhile human relationship, depends upon being able to assume an extended shared world.”

--Stefan Collini

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***“War is what happens
 when language fails.”***

--Margaret Atwood

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At HomeFront, encouragement to read to kids

by *Ellen Gilbert*

I'm often struck by studies showing higher success rates in school among children who have been read to at an early age. As a librarian and mother of two who spent many hours reading to my children when they were young, the correlation makes sense to me.

But not all children get that literacy boost: the National Center for Education Statistics reports that only about half of this country's children aged three to five are read to on a regular basis by a family member. What's more, children in families with incomes below the poverty line are less likely to be read to than are children in families with incomes at or above poverty.

With this in mind, my fall 2017 session of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos at HomeFront's Family Preservation Center in Lawrenceville, designed to welcome thirty-eight formerly homeless families with onsite access to job training, child care, education and other services, included an added component: I reminded participants, each week, of the importance of reading to their children.

"It doesn't matter what you read to them," I told HomeFront residents, who included women and men from their late teens to their late thirties, all of them parents. "Serious books or comic books-- just as long as you share a story."

The well-stocked, light-filled library at the Family Preservation Center provided a welcome setting for my encouragement. The room models the best of library design, locally and across the country: libraries as hubs for shared technology, ongoing community programs, and comfortable, non-threatening environments for all ages.

"When a library is open, no matter its size or shape, democracy is open, too," political commentator Bill Moyers has observed. The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy once suggested that "instead of going to Paris to attend lectures," one should "go to the public library... you won't come out for 20 years if you really wish to learn." That doesn't mean libraries

are caves of hushed studiousness; more and more, they serve as vibrant centers for dialogue, discovery, classes and exhibits.

At HomeFront, the goal is to "end homelessness in central New Jersey by harnessing the caring, resources and expertise of the community." According to HomeFront's website, the center's design—including a fountain in the entrance, comfortable dorm suites and yes, the library—aims to tell clients, "Your better life starts right here and right now."

People & Stories is proud to be part of that message. "We provide the materials for the bridge from their lives to literature," P&S humanities associate Rachel Epstein noted recently. "They build the bridge."

"I learned more about my father," commented a 14-year-old.

For me, the chance to connect with participants over stories—"A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" by Ernest Hemingway, "Fresh Fruit" by Marisella Viega, "Eveline" by James Joyce and "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin—was a weekly high. Community members who joined the group for our final session also cherished the experience. And HomeFront residents echoed that enthusiasm.

"I was honored to share, exchange gifts, and get to make real friends at the group," noted one of the participants on the final evaluation. Asked whether they got something unexpected out of the program, another attendee expressed pleasure at "how the interaction worked out."

The presence of several participants' older children at that last session highlighted even more potential for intergenerational People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos programs in the future.

"I learned more about my father who shared when we were talking about his safe place," commented a 14-year old. "One woman in the group said that she had been given many lectures by her mother, but later in life she realized she was saying the same things to her children that her mother was saying," she added. "I could really relate to that."

"Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart."

--Salman Rushdie

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Immigrants find *solidaridad* in GyC sessions

Deborah Salmon will not forget the woman in her 60s who participated in one of her first Gente y Cuentos groups. Salmon was talking about the pleasure of hearing books read aloud when the woman became tearful.

“She started to cry and said, ‘We didn’t have books, and nobody read to me.’” Salmon remembers. “I said, ‘It’s never too late.’”

Salmon, an Argentinian-born psychologist who found her way to Gente y Cuentos through her work in a bilingual education program at New York University, coordinates groups through the New Americans Welcome Center, a program of the YMCA in Staten Island.

Participants in her groups—women and some men, ranging from early 20s to mid-60s—come from Mexico, Ecuador, Honduras, the Dominican Republic and Peru. Most work full-time; many are raising children or grandchildren.

“They are tired and stressed,” she says. “Some are illiterate. Some had a very short formal education. Usually they come from work and feel very powerless at work. In the groups, they recover. They regain their pride for their native language and traditions.”

Salmon recalls participants’ reactions to “La Noche Buena” by Tomás Rivera, the story of a woman who nervously ventures into the city to buy Christmas gifts for her children, then panics once inside the store. In her confusion, she stuffs toys into her bag without paying. A security guard castigates her; back at home, the woman’s husband offers reassurance: “You don’t need to go out of the house. I will provide everything.”

Listeners were eager to discuss the roles of women and men in Mexican households, Salmon says. “Some people say that even though the man is very macho, he wants to protect [his wife] from the aggression of the outside.”

They also talked about their sense, as immigrants, of being closely watched. “They say, ‘When we go to the mall, people are looking at us. We always have

this feeling that we don’t fit.’”

In Gente y Cuentos sessions, Salmon says, readers can speak their first language, relax their customary vigilance and have time to reflect. “It’s important to learn English to communicate. But the power they have when they talk in Spanish is completely different. That’s why Gente y Cuentos is so important. They relax. They don’t have to say, ‘Excuse me, what did you say?’ or ‘I don’t understand you.’

“It’s a safe and calm place where they can start to think.”

“They are tired and stressed... Usually they come from work and feel very powerless at work. In the groups, they recover. They regain their pride for their native language and traditions.”

Salmon often begins groups with an upbeat story—perhaps one by Ángeles Mastretta, a Mexican writer who leavens her work with humor—before moving to stories such as “La Prodigiosa Tarde de Baltazar” by Gabriel García Márquez, about a carpenter who crafts intricate bird cages as a hobby.

That piece typically provokes discussion about social class, but also elicits personal stories about participants’ own hobbies. “It brings out that a lot of people are very creative and do beautiful things with their hands,” Salmon says. “It always surprises me: the two parts of a person. Even though they struggle in life, they always find time to sew, to knit.”

Salmon has been coordinating Gente y Cuentos for a decade; it remains “one of the most beautiful things that I do... I grow with them, every time. Maybe because I went through a similar situation, I can feel what the group means. At the end of the cycle of eight weeks, there’s *solidaridad*.”

“While thought exists, words are alive and literature becomes an escape, not from, but into living.”

--Cyril Connolly

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On the Bookshelf...

Cuz: The Life and Times of Michael A.,
by Danielle S. Allen. New York: W.W.
Norton & Co., 2017.

by Patricia Andres

Cuz is the deeply moving story of the author's cousin, Michael Allen: his early years, his incarceration as a teenager and his tragically violent death. The narrative voice is empathic and intelligent, finely tuned in its interrogation of social inequities and our criminal justice system, specifically on the ways young black men are casualties of both.

"Cuz," a word that means both "cousin" and "cause," says it all: Allen's work is a praise song for Michael's life. At the same time, it is filled with yearning to answer the question: why did things go so very wrong?

While the author's voice is celebratory when focused on Michael's quick wit, his easy-going nature, his deep desire to learn

and his creativity, the overall tone is elegiac, mourning for Michael and others who've suffered like him. The horror of the prison industrial complex as Allen represents it rings true to this reader who has witnessed so many lives on hold in detention centers, re-entry centers and prisons where the chances for growth and meaning are slim.

Yet Allen explores one exception to this grim prognosis: quality educational programs for those incarcerated. Michael discovered the work of Dante, Homer and Virgil while in prison and composed moving responses to what he'd read: "The Inferno is constructed like a prison...to the state of California I am not Michael Alexander Allen, but I am K-10033...The souls in the Inferno are called by name. To some, it may be a matter of filing but to me, it is a means to keep anyone with the potential to be great, mentally enslaved."
