

foreword

The Poetry of Everyday Life is a how-to book for everyone.

This is a book where language itself becomes a way of life, where poetry, so often thought of as obscure or elitist, takes its rightful place as the essence of language.

The Poetry of Everyday Life acknowledges and respects as “real” art what has come to be known as “folk” art, which is what Steve Zeitlin does for his day job as founding director of City Lore, the urban folklore center in New York. Since there’s precious little basket weaving and pottery making going on in the mean streets of New York City, Zeitlin finds art in the words of the everyday citizens, tales told by real people, the characters and denizens who give the city its true story—its poetry. Although they are generally not poets, “real” poets do show up here, from Whitman to Tennyson to Shel Silverstein. On one page is Zeitlin’s friend from elementary school Alex Pludwinsky, on another Billy Collins. Read just the poems in this book and you’ve got a great anthology. You know poetry—the sections where the lines are indented and the words don’t go to the end of the page, poetry itself being as non-regularized as the cornucopia of characters living in these pages.

This book is a folklorist’s contact list come to life, right before your eyes, spouting wisdom and truths that, as Zeitlin sees it, are actual poems. And after he points this out to you, then you see them that way, too. *The Poetry of Everyday Life* takes the black and white of a printed book and pours color in. We’re Dorothy, arriving in Oz, not in Kansas anymore.

Every quote gets credited with the speaker's name. And then every name is ID'd, as Zeitlin seeks to credit each scrap of wisdom that came his way as a folklorist and a human being. The point is that acknowledging who spoke or wrote the words is crucial to understanding the content of what is said or written. In this way, Zeitlin is true to the impulse of the oral tradition. It's all genealogy, someone begetting someone who begets someone else. Except here it's words that do the begetting. It's the memories of your grandparents that are the poems, and when you lose that human connection, you lose the poetry.

And then there's the way that *The Poetry of Everyday Life* finds real poetry in real events. Whether it's the city reacting to 9/11, a sideshow barker inviting you into the tent, or two people inventing love, human happenstance not only provides an opportunity for a poem but is in itself a poem. In this way he reminds me of the griots, the West African poet-musicians, keepers of the oral tradition. There's not an event that can happen in tribal life in much of West Africa unless there's a griot there to announce it, to sing it into existence accompanied by the twenty-one-string kora, to pronounce to one and all that there's going to be a wedding now! or a naming ceremony, or a funeral.

Folks! Dear readers! One and all! Step right up! Direct your eyes to these pages, aka the Eighth Wonder of the World! For herein Steve Zeitlin pitches poetry the way a carny barker does, the way a good preacher/rabbi/swami does. In fact, he considers these talkers *poets*. His weekly Ping-Pong co-combatants turn out to be poets. His father, the Jewish atheist, just happens to be a poet. The man who lives in the subway tunnel? You got it. Listen to him long enough, you may come to believe, as he does, that

You are a poet!

(I like the pullout quotes spread through the chapters. If you want a shortcut to being a poet, just use them as a to-do list.)

The *Poetry of Everyday Life*, with its folkloric take on poetry, is in fact part of a new, diversifying definition of poetry in the United States, one that is developing its own history, often from ancient lineages. Hip hop

is an example. Zeitlin sees the graffiti artists writing on trains as taking risks far different from the dictums you learn when your creative writing professor urges you to “take risks!” with your writing. I think of the visionaries, the precursors of hip hop, poets like proto-rappers Abiodun Oyewole and Umar Bin Hassan of *The Last Poets* and Gil Scott-Heron.

And there’s the poetry slam, the mock-competitive poetry event invented by poet–construction worker Marc Smith, which is among the most vital grassroots art movements of the last fifty years. Smith sees slam as a wellspring for community, and the movement is still growing thirty years after the first hastily improvised slam (yes, he called it that from the start) at the Get Me High bar in Chicago.

Zeitlin also follows in the footsteps of a couple of other poets who helped popularize the art toward the end of the twentieth century. Piri Thomas (1928–2011), the Nuyorican (New York–Puerto Rican) poet, also took on the idea of the universality of poetry. There’s a documentary film of his life named after words he often spoke, words that could have been Zeitlin’s: *Every Child Is Born a Poet*. The film moves from El Barrio (Spanish Harlem), where Piri was born and raised, his coming-of-age via gangs, drugs, and crime, through his years in prison, to the writing of his autobiography, *Down These Mean Streets*, and ultimately his becoming a populist prophet dedicated to spreading the gospel of poetry. For Thomas, the innocence of a child, the belief in imagination, is humanity’s natural state—as well as the state of being for the poet. The brutality of the mean streets of reality drowns that innocence. But one can be redeemed by returning to a state of grace—via poetry.

Walter Lowenfels (1897–1976) was another poet who shared Zeitlin’s inclusive dynamic. *We’re All Poets, Really*, proclaims the title of an anthology he edited. Lowenfels was a radical Left political poet, arrested for being a communist in 1953. His anthology called *From the Belly of the Shark* with the tagline *Poems by Chicanos, Eskimos, Hawaiians, Indians, Puerto Ricans with Related Poems by Others* foreshadowed multiculturalism by decades. By recognizing the variety of poetry traditions, Lowenfels was getting closer to Zeitlin’s approach to poetry as the poetics of life—which I call “word art.” My work with endangered

languages has helped me realize that every culture has a word for art/poetry of some kind—be it written or spoken or sung, whether it’s aphorisms or stories or competitions. Papa Susso, the great Gambian griot, didn’t consider his work to be poetry until we discussed how his words worked in the community. Now he says, “I’m a poet, a keeper of the oral tradition.”

Zeitlin’s definition of poetry in this book takes the art part for granted. See the poetry in the world, he says, and use language to the max. Like Walt Whitman himself, Zeitlin hears America singing. Unable to restrain himself, however, Steve Zeitlin the poet hears us—ALL of US! singing—in the rain! No surprise that he titled his book of poems exactly that, *I Hear America Singing in the Rain*.

It’s that invincible optimism that gives this book its energy. I’ve spent years seeking a place for hip hop and spoken word inside the canon of English-language poetry. Zeitlin goes even further: he hears poetry in a homeless man’s musings, in his wife’s creating a melody, even in a poem! But he can’t let the poem sit still. Here’s what he has to say about Solomon Grundy, who, if you recall, was

Born on Monday,
Christened on Tuesday,
Married on Wednesday,
Took ill on Thursday,
Grew worse on Friday,
Died on Saturday,
Buried on Sunday.
That was the end
Of Solomon Grundy.

For Zeitlin, “If we can create a society in which our apocryphal Solomon Grundy can play his heart out on Monday, raise hell on Tuesday, get a job on Wednesday, court all day Thursday, parent Friday, then retire, travel, and reminisce about it on Saturday—and if he finds traditional expressive material that is vital at every stage of his life—that really is not such a bad life for Solomon Grundy.” Or for any of us.

Poetry has traditionally been thought of as a solitary art. There’s Emily Dickinson in her upstairs bedroom in Amherst, secreted away,

jotting lines on every available paper scrap, poems to be filed away, publishing only seven poems of the 1,789 she wrote. In a sense, poetry itself has been locked in that room with her, a true joy of life that has been kept hidden.

By showing us that poetry lives everywhere, by treating us readers like we're all poets, Steve seems to make the whole world into a poem, with all of us collaborating daily in the writing of it. Now, that's a poem!

Bob Holman
The Bowery, 2015