

Poets of Privilege



I think it fair to say that one of the first qualifications of an American poet laureate is that he not in any way be dangerous.

–Joseph Epstein, former editor, *The American Scholar**

by [G. Tod Slone](#) (January 2022)

Highlighted on the webpage of the Academy of American Poets, a multi-million dollar nonprofit, is a quote from poet laureate Joy Harjo: “Without poetry, we lose our way.” The quote is unsurprisingly innocuous, considering the Academy’s essential *raison d’être*: the business of poetry. In reality, the opposite is likely true, for with poetry, many if not most poets lose their way, straying off the road of truth and

freedom of expression, willfully ending up castrated, coopted, and corralled. Conformity beckons. Money corrupts. Titles serve as shields. If a poet wears blinders, many perks might reward him or her, from tenure to laureateships, fellowships, grants, invitations, publications, and on and on. But if a poet chooses instead to place truth and freedom of expression above career, those perks inevitably become unavailable.

Poet Warrior, a memoir of poetry and stories by Joy Harjo, was sitting on the shelf of my local library. The title evoked the absurdity of *Outlaw Poetry* and its so-called outlaw poets. Since I'd already [satirized Harjo in a cartoon](#), I decided to leave the book on the shelf. Later, however, I'd drive back to the library and take it out—the book and author begged to be criticized. In an email to a friend, I mentioned the essay I was writing on the book and that I was going to try to get it published and in doing so would likely burn a bridge or two. She responded:

You know you should probably withdraw that Joy H thing. I can't imagine they would even print something critical of her. I mean, it isn't my thing either, but I do know she is huge. I mean all to be gained from that is what? I remember you having something about her on the blog or the journal or something a while back, so it could seem like you are targeting her. All the more since she is fe[male]. Get mad if you want, but there are way better things to write about.

Has it gotten so bad that one cannot criticize the poet laureate of the U.S.? Yes! And that's why this essay needs to be written and disseminated. Harjo has become a prime figure of the literary establishment. Sketching one cartoon and writing one essay with her regard can hardly be considered as "targeting her." Free speech is in peril. Like other tentacles of the establishment, the literary one tends to detest free speech. If I were to restrain myself, for fear of burning a bridge or two, then I'd be guilty of aiding and abetting the killing of free speech. And so, I pondered the

advice, but rejected it.

How can a poet like Harjo, “a critically-acclaimed poet,” in the words of Poetry Foundation, perhaps the biggest spoke (\$200 million in its coffers) on the poetry-establishment wheel, proclaim to be a “warrior?” How can an academic (University of Chicago and University of Tennessee), who likely never criticized the universities feeding her, proclaim to be a “warrior?” Native-American ancestry! That’s how. Certainly not hardcore criticism vis-a-vis the academic/literary establishment! Harjo is a rare third-term Poet Laureate of the United States, in essence, an establishment-poet supreme—a State Poet. How not to think of Gorki, another State Poet, though of the former USSR, who had visited a Soviet gulag and argued that its [punishment cells were “excellent!”](#)

Few poets ever wonder who constitute the faceless judges making the anointments for the prizes, fellowships, and laureates. What might their biases be? In the case of the poet laureate of the U.S., only one person, the librarian of the Library of Congress (Carla Hayden),** chooses who shall be anointed. Not very democratic at all! One must wonder how an intelligent person like Harjo cannot understand what the designation, poet laureate, really implies: certainly NOT “warrior,” but rather 100% establishment-approved!

The back cover of *Poet Warrior* consists of six blurbs of glowing praise, including “giant-hearted, gorgeous, and glorious gift to the world” (Pam Houston), “magician and master of the English language” (Jonah Raskin), “hero’s journey” (Sandra Cisneros), and “saga about the survival of spirituality and racism” (Rebecca Steinitz). To counter the blurb ad nauseam tendency in the publishing world, I avoid it for books I’ve written and instead include the harshest criticism received. The back cover of *Oil of Vitriol*, for example, notes “socially incorrect in behavior, lacking civility or good manners” (Jay Rubin), “a bit harsh” (poet

laureate Billy Collins), “slander is why I’ll never be able to publish any of your essays or reviews” (Tim Green), and “you smell of someone who burns bridges faster than you can light the matches and it is a shame” (John Thompson). And yes, those blurbs are certainly more indicative of “warrior” credentials, despite my white skin color, than the ones cited on the back cover of Harjo’s book.

Extreme conformity seems to characterize far too many poets today, especially the ones raking in the money like Harjo, who has been the recipient of a number of establishment prizes, grants and fellowships, including the Josephine Miles Poetry Award, the Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets, the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America, the Arizona Commission on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rasmuson Foundation, the Witter Bynner Foundation, and the Ruth Lilly Prize in Poetry. Ruth Lilly, of course, is the drug heiress who filled the coffers of Poetry Foundation, making it the most powerful poetry establishment on the planet. Dare criticize it, [as I have done and do](#) and for it thou shalt not exist as a poet. Dare criticize the NEA [as I have done](#) and thou shalt never receive any public-grant money from it.

“For the poets, dreamers, visionaries, and risk takers who planted light in the field of darkness so we could rise up,” begins Harjo on the first page of her book. Glorification and self-glorification have become quite common in the largely unaccountable elitist world of poetry. Former poet laureate Ted Kooser encapsulates the aberrancy: “If I don’t take the risk, I’ll wind up with a bloodless poem. I have to be out there on the edge.” Clearly, Kooser did not take the risk and was not out there on the edge! Hell, he was an insurance executive for 35 years, noting: “I liked the money and the benefits [of the corporate insurance world]. I liked the structure, too.” The absurdity is ubiquitous. State Librarian Kevin Starr declared: “When Californians honor one

poet laureate, they honor all as seers—gifted with vision to see what others cannot. Having a poet laureate for California will show the world that Californians acknowledge their literary wealth as well as their commercial and industrial wealth.” How sad that those who took risks might have somehow helped those like Harjo rise up the establishment ladder, instead of compelling those like her to question and challenge the establishment.

Finally, this brief essay is obviously not a critical review of Harjo’s book, for I only scanned through the book and could not bear to read it page by page. We are drowning/reason is drowning in black good/white bad identity politics today. If the book had been written by a poet—a veritable poet warrior—who truly dared question and challenge the various tentacles of the poetry machine, I would have eagerly read it. Now, if only I could somehow pierce Harjo’s limelighted elite cocoon, actually contact her, and get her to read this brief essay, perhaps it might incite a little thought on her part. And so I sent the following missive. Will I receive a response of a non-robotic nature?

To Brett Zongker, Library of Congress Office of Communications:

“For Poet Laureate media/press inquiries,” you state that one should contact you. Well, I cannot locate an email address for your poet laureate, Joy Harjo. Please send it to me. I’d like to send her the essay I just wrote with her regard (see below). Thank you for your hopeful attention.

No response was ever received. The autocratic-selection process of laureateship positions needs to be decried, and the poets who accept it need to be harshly criticized. When politics and business co-opt poetry, as they have in America and elsewhere, they inevitably castrate poetry, fund and provide platforms to castrated poets, while denying them to poets who dare criticize the system. Now to paraphrase the

words of Joseph Epstein, who I'd [cartooned in 2008](#): I think it fair to say that one of the first qualifications of an American poet laureate is that she not in any way be a warrior...

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*Epstein, for the crime of free expression, was eventually cancelled by *The American Scholar* itself, as well as the English Department, where he once taught at Northwestern University (see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Epstein_\(writer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Epstein_(writer))).

**In 2014, I contacted the Library of Congress, which did not respond to my "[Open Letter To the Library of Congress Poetry and Literature Center, Another Odd Sponsor of Banned Books Week Proudly... Banning Books.](#)" In vain, I attempted to get it to subscribe to *The American Dissident*. After all, it subscribes to other poetry journals. Beacher Wiggins, Director for Acquisitions & Bibliographic Access of the Library of Congress responded: "My apologies for not having responded to your earlier message. The Library has determined that it will not acquire your serial" (see "[Unchecked Self-Aggrandizement—A Review of an Interview](#)"). Then when I asked what the criteria for acquisitions were, Wiggins would simply not respond. In 2017, I depicted [Librarian Carla Hayden](#) in a satirical cartoon. Perhaps that was not one of the criteria?

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G. Tod Slone, PhD, lives on Cape Cod, where he was permanently banned in 2012 without warning or due process from Sturgis Library, one of the very oldest in the country. His civil rights are being denied today because he is not permitted to

attend any cultural or political events held at his neighborhood library. The only stated reason for the banning was “for the safety of the staff and public.” He has no criminal record at all and has never made a threat. His real crime was that he challenged, in writing, the library’s “collection development” mission that stated “libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view.” His point of view was somehow not part of “all points of view.” He is a dissident poet/writer/cartoonist and editor of [The American Dissident](#).

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