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Janice Harrington and the hidden wealth of C-U

FEATURED ARTICLE

Posted in ARTS by [Caleb Curtiss](#) on Friday, October 16, 2009 at 1:00 pm

The other day I was speaking with a coworker of mine about how many resources we as Champaign-Urbaniens have at our disposal. Beautiful parks, two great public libraries, a lively music scene, a diverse art scene and yes, a tier one research institution are all a quick bus ride away. But it was only when our conversation turned to how many bona fide literary voices we have in our community that my coworker turned to me and said, "we're just so rich, you know?" She was right, of course. We are very rich. And perhaps there's no better evidence of our wealth than Janice Harrington.

Harrington moved to Champaign-Urbana in 1990. Since then she has worn several different hats: storyteller, children's author, poet, professor – the list goes on. If you are local, and of my generation, the role you may most recognize her in is that of Champaign Pubic Library's Children's Librarian. One of my first memories of Janice is actually of her scolding me for choosing to blatantly stick a wad of chewing gum to the underside of a bookshelf. Suffice it to say that I was old enough to know better, and I'd like to think that my manners have since improved. But this is what she did for years: taught kids (of all ages)

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Photo by Rachel Eliza Griffiths

their manners, shown them how to find books and even how to read.

Then, in the mid-1990's at a children's poetry workshop hosted at the library, the first seedling of Harrington's literary ascent began to set root.

"Michael Madonick, a local poet, made the mistake of praising my work. I started writing again and I didn't stop." Invigorated by this encouragement, Harrington began writing in earnest, having her poems accepted by ever more prestigious publications. But even with her new found artistic energy, writing was something Harrington used to fill the margins of her time. "I thought I was always going to be a Children's Librarian writing in the early morning hours or on my day off."

(Listen to Janice Harrington read "Shaking the Grass" from *Even the Hollow My Body Made is Gone*, BOA Limited Editions)

And so it went for several years, until Madonick approached Harrington once again, this time asking her to teach for the University of Illinois' Creative Writing Program. At first Harrington turned him down, but after a second overture several years later, she began to think seriously about changing her profession. "It was a really hard decision. Immensely difficult. And it really came down to me saying to myself: you should do the thing that means you're going to keep growing and learning and developing."

Harrington at the Jaffe Award ceremony



And that's just what she has done. Since reengaging with her creative impulses, Harrington has published several highly praised children's books (*Going North*, *The Chicken Chasing Queen of Lamar County* and most recently *Roberto Walks Home*) as well as a volume of poetry, *Even the Hollow My Body Made is Gone*, recipient of the A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize in 2006 and the 2008 Kate Tufts Discovery Award. Her poems have appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Field*, and *Harvard Review*, just to name a few. What's more is that this year, Harrington has been recognized with a Rona Jaffe Foundation Award, an honor given annually to six promising women writers. It comes with a grant of \$25,000.

Recognition like this is rare in the literary world, but Harrington is by all accounts deserving. In the words of her anonymous Jaffe Award nominator, "Despite the difficulty of the lives she writes about, Harrington is a poet full of joy, delight, and faith in the world. This rather unfamiliar 'upbeat' message is masterfully integrated into the poems and only adds to their resonance and staying power." Indeed, this message of joy, delight and faith has been one that Janice Harrington has carried with her throughout her career, one that has helped enrich our community for some time now.

Harrington is currently working on a second book of poetry tentatively named *Night Shift* which is based on her experience working night shifts as a nurse's aid at a county nursing home. Her most recent children's book *Mama Nsoso Builds a New House* has been accepted and is set for release in the near future.

documents graffiti in Champaign-Urbana on 02/07/11.



Hah I know Star, she's talented. and she will SPAZ when she sees this lol. I'll make sure she gets to look at this when I see her in class. ;P

Posted by inX to the entry 'Local man documents graffiti in Champaign-Urbana on 02/07/11.



How do I get a hold of this Johnny Storm fellow? I know some people who would be

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